

ABRAHAM ABULAFIA AND ECSTATIC KABBALAH

1. A SHORT BIOGRAPHY OF ABULAFIA

Abraham Abulafia (1240–c. 1292) is the founder of the ecstatic trend of Kabbalah.¹ Born in Saragossa, in Aragon, he was educated by his father, Shmuel, in Tudela until the latter's death in 1258. In 1260 he left Catalonia for the land of Israel in search of the mythical river Sambatyon. In the mid-1260s he was in Capua studying Jewish philosophy, especially the *Guide of the Perplexed* of Rabbi Moshe ben Maimon (Maimonides). At the end of the 1260s he arrived in Barcelona, and in 1270 he began to study Kabbalah there, perhaps as the result of a revelation.² From 1271 to 1273 he was teaching his Kabbalah and his special, mystical understanding of Maimonides' *Guide* to some Kabbalists in Castile. At the end of 1273 or early

1274 he left Spain, and for the next five years he attempted to teach his special type of mysticism in Greece: in Patros, Thebes, and Evripis. In 1279 he returned to Italy and, after a short period of detention in Trani in the same year, again spent some months in Capua, where he taught his Kabbalah to four students. In 1280 he made an unsuccessful effort to meet Pope Nicholas III while the latter was in retreat in the castle of Soriano, near Rome. When Abulafia arrived at the castle, the pope suddenly died of apoplexy, and as a result Abulafia was imprisoned for two weeks in Rome by the Minorite Franciscans. In 1282 he was in Messina, Sicily, whether he presumably traveled immediately after his release from prison.

Well before his arrival in Sicily, starting in the early 1270s, Abulafia had written several books in which he described in some detail his peculiar type of Kabbalah, consisting of a variety of techniques aimed at reaching an ecstatic experience.³ He called this experience "prophecy." By the end of the 1270s his literary and propagandistic activities had dramatically intensified. In 1280 alone he wrote two of his most important books: a large commentary on Maimonides' *Guide* named *Sitrei Torah*, written in Capua, and an important and most influential mystical handbook, *Sefer Hayyei ha-'Olam ha-Ba'*, written in Rome. Between 1279 and 1283 he also wrote several "prophetic" works, which unfortunately have been lost.⁴ Abulafia's own commentary on these works has, however, survived. It is mainly from these commentaries that we learn about Abulafia's prophetic claims, as well as of some messianic aspirations stemming from his revelation in Barcelona in 1270. These aspirations prompted him to seek an audience with the pope in 1280, following another major revelation in 1279. It seems that some Jews, apparently fearing the negative consequences of such an audacious enterprise, distanced themselves from Abulafia and in some cases even persecuted him.⁵

An errant teacher of Maimonides' *Guide of the Perplexed*,⁶ a mystic, a prophet, a messiah, a preacher of a new Kabbalah to both Jews and Christians, a prolific writer—these epithets describe Abraham Abulafia at the time of his arrival in Messina, where he would remain for the rest of his life, producing more than two-thirds of his extensive writings, which would contribute substantially to both the Jewish and the Christian cultures.⁷

2. A MYSTICAL INTERPRETATION OF THE *GUIDE*

Italy hosted the composition of most of Abulafia's oeuvre. There he also disseminated Kabbalah, either as a certain mystical interpretation of Maimonides' *Guide of the Perplexed* or as a more advanced form of mysticism, which will be described in chapter 5. With regard to his interpretation of the *Guide*, we learn from a very important document, included in a book written in 1286 in Messina:

And I have taught it [the Guide] in several places: in Capua, to four [students], accidentally, but they went on erroneous ways, since they were thoughtless young men, and I left them. And at Thebes [I had] ten [students], and none of them [profited from the teaching], but they spoiled the two ways, the first [the plain] and the second [the kabbalistic]. In Evripis four [students], and there also was no one who profited, since the thoughts of men are different from one another, *a fortiori* regarding the depth of wisdom and the *Sitrei Torah*, and I did not see one of them who was worthy to receive even the notes of the truth as it is. And in Rome [I taught the Guide] to two elders of the city, R. Tzidqiah and R. Yeshayah, my allies, blessed be their memory, and they succeeded in a limited way, and they died, as they were very old. And in Barcelona two [students], one of them an old one, R. Qalonimus, blessed be his memory, a venerable man, and one young man, learned and intelligent and very respected, from the aristocracy of the city, whose name was R. Yehudah named Salmon, and he succeeded in a very excellent way. And at Burgos two [students], a master and [his] student. The name of the master [was] R. Moses Cinfa . . . a great man and an honorable scholar. And the name of the student is R. Shem Tov, also a kind and good young man, but his youth prevented him from learning, and he did not study it [the Guide] but only a few external traditions, neither he [R. Shem Tov] nor his master [R. Moses]. And in Medinat Shalom [I had] two [students], one of them R. Shemuel the Prophet, who received from me a few traditions, and the second R. Joseph Gikatilla, and he unquestionably succeeded in a wondrous way concerning what he studied under my guidance, and he added much from his strength and knowledge, and God was with him.⁸

This passage is unique not only in the kabbalistic literature, but also in the entire literature dealing with the dissemination of the Guide. No philosopher traveled so much and was continuously involved for so long in spreading the views of Maimonides. I assume that Abulafia was involved in teaching the Guide for at least seven years, during which he composed three commentaries on this book in a wide range of places: Catalonia, Castile, Greece, Italy, and Sicily.

Abulafia's list of the places and students he taught is not chronological. For example, he begins the list with Capua, where he stayed in late 1279 and early 1280, and only later mentions the Greek cities; likewise, his visits in Catalonia and Castile took place long before his second stays in Italy and Greece. The list also mentions by name only the students who succeeded, in one way or another, in following his teaching. Another noteworthy feature is that the successful cases are presented in the latter part of the list, with only the failures in the first half. Last

but not least, the list ends with the name of R. Joseph Gikatilla, who is presented as an accomplished disciple. Thus the list is arranged according to a hierarchical rather than a geographical principle.

Abulafia's observations also signal a difference between his students in Greece and those in Spain. He labels all his Greek students and most of his Italian ones as failures. In contrast, all his Spanish students are described as either very or somewhat successful. This conspicuous difference between East and West, with Italy occupying an intermediate status, presumably reflects cultural differences between the relatively free and rich spiritual life of Jews in Spain and Jewish life in Byzantium and Italy. In Spain, interest in Kabbalah was growing at the very time Abulafia was moving about there, whereas in Italy and Byzantium the medieval forms of Jewish mysticism were apparently unknown in the late 1270s. Abulafia's peculiar type of mysticism, combining Maimonidean metaphysics and psychology with the Ashkenazi mystical practices of combinations of letters, must have seemed bizarre, and enjoyed a poorer reception, in less developed areas. In the second half of the thirteenth century, the younger Jewish intelligentsia in Spain were already seeking a spiritual alternative to Maimonides' rationalism, whereas in Italy the more classical form of Maimonideanism continued to be taught as late as the end of the thirteenth century. Thus it is not surprising that Abulafia found fewer but better students in the West, more numerous but worse ones in the East.

As far as I can determine from my own acquaintance with medieval materials, the passage above provides a unique example of the itinerary of a wandering teacher. It covers an unusually large area and at least sixteen years of activity. Moreover, this teacher indicates that he taught a very specific work, the Guide, on a scale never equaled either before or afterward. But the passage reveals more than the uniqueness of Abulafia as an errant teacher and disseminator of the ideas of the Guide. Here we have testimony about the first attempt to propagate a very specific, kabbalistic understanding of the Guide. Abulafia mentions "two ways," presumably of study. One, we may assume, involves learning the plain meaning of the Guide by a linear reading of the text according to the order of the chapters; the second way, according to this passage, involves plumbing the depths of wisdom and *Sitrei Torah*, topics that in Abulafia's commentaries on the Guide refer to kabbalistic matters as he conceived them. Abulafia's testimony that some students were given the second way of reading the Guide appears to signal the first attempt to disseminate an esoteric reading of Kabbalah beyond Spain, the stronghold of this lore in the second part of the thirteenth century.

Abulafia's version of Kabbalah seems to have been the first form of medieval mysticism propagated in Italy, Sicily, and Greece. Inevitably, Abulafia's type of Kabbalah was influential in the later development of this lore in Italy and in the

Byzantine Empire. Abulafia's description of his students indicates that at least a large proportion of them were young persons. At this stage, there was no minimal age requirement for the study of Kabbalah.

3. THE KABBALAH OF THE ERRANT SCHOLARS

Abulafia spent most of his life wandering between Catalonia, Castile, Italy, Sicily, Greece, and the land of Israel. This mobility may reflect in part his own personality and inclination; but it was also at least a partial result of environmental pressures. Abulafia was both a charismatic and a disturbing figure. He left Spain in the mid-1270s, when interest there in the synthesis between Kabbalah and philosophy was declining and being replaced by a critique of philosophy. The growing emphasis upon theosophy and theurgy affected even Kabbalists such as Joseph Gikatilla, a former student of Abulafia, who changed his interest from linguistic to theosophical Kabbalah. Still later, as we have seen, Abulafia was also persecuted by Jews who feared repercussions from his messianic claims. These conflicts, potential and actual, account for Abulafia's years of wandering until he disappeared, sometime after 1291, in Sicily. This linkage between wandering and an interest in ecstatic Kabbalah was not limited to Abulafia; at least two other adherents to ecstatic Kabbalah testify to a wandering existence at the end of the thirteenth century and the beginning of the fourteenth. One of these was R. Nathan ben Sa'adyah Harar, the author of *Sefer Sha'arei Tzedeq*, who was deeply influenced by the kabbalistic theories of Abulafia. A contemporary of R. Nathan and probably also his student, R. Isaac of Acre, was also known as wandering from Acre to Catalonia, Castile, and possibly also North Africa. It seems safe to infer that in this period the highly individualistic experiences of the ecstatic Kabbalists created tensions with the Jewish establishment and made an errant existence expedient if not necessary. In contrast, the great centers of Jewish learning welcomed and supported the more socially oriented theosophical-theurgical Kabbalists.

4. MESSIANIC MISSION AND KABBALISTIC PROPAGANDA

Abulafia's revelations do not deal solely with idiosyncratic spiritual matters. He repeatedly describes himself as a messenger to the people of the "Isle of Power" or the "Isle of Mirror," which in Abulafia's nomenclature means Sicily, where he wrote one of his most important commentaries on his own prophetic books. Here I am less interested in the missionary aspects of Abulafia's messianic and apocalyptic revelations than in the propagandistic aspects of his activity. For him messianism and apocalypticism were not a matter of personal fate and individual achievement, but much more a message destined to be disseminated in order to awaken the awareness of the Jews. So, for example, he indicates that God has sent

him to tell "the words of the living God to the Jews, who are circumcised in their flesh but uncircumcised in their hearts."⁹ Abulafia claims that the poor to whom he has been sent, and for whose sake he has revealed his vision, have not paid due attention to the "form of his coming" and that they have spoken about him and his God words that should not be uttered.¹⁰ Then he adds: "God has commanded him [Abulafia] to speak to the gentiles, those of uncircumcised heart and uncircumcised flesh, in His name. And he has done so, and he spoke to them, and they believed in the message of the Lord. But they did not return to God, because they relied on their sword and bow, and God has hardened their uncircumcised and impure hearts."¹¹

This is a very precious testimony concerning the propagandistic activities of Abulafia. Indeed, the dissemination of an eschatological-kabbalistic message to the Jews in general may be understood as part of a turning of ecstatic Kabbalah to external affairs, and thus signals a change from the politics of Kabbalists before Abulafia. More or less esoteric, this lore was not intended to be disseminated to larger audiences even by those among the Geronese Kabbalists, who had adopted a more exoteric type of writing. None of the Geronese Kabbalists mentioned discussions with Christians in general, let alone matters of Kabbalah. Clearly, none of them undertook a propagandistic task of the intensity and amplitude of Abulafia's. He conceived of himself as a messenger to a nation¹² rather than only to an elite and traveled from country to country in order to propagate his kabbalistic views and thus fulfill his messianic mission. Perhaps a more concise expression of this propagandistic revelation is to be found already in a book written in 1280: "You should vivify the multitude by means of the name Yah [a divine name] and be as a lion who leaps forth in every city and open place."¹³

However, much more exceptional is Abulafia's turn to the gentiles as a result of disappointment in the Jews' lack of receptiveness. That move led him, as we shall see in the next chapter, even to attempt to meet with the pope.

5. ECSTATIC KABBALAH: SPANISH OR ITALIAN?

One of the important distinctions proposed in Gershom Scholem's *Major Trends*, but subsequently almost totally forgotten in Scholem's school, has to do with what Scholem regarded as two major lines in Spanish Kabbalah. Scholem asserted that Abulafia's Kabbalah "marks the culminating point in the development of two opposing schools of thought in Spanish Kabbalism, schools which I would like to call the ecstatic and the theosophical."¹⁴

Scholem's assumption that Abulafia represents one of the two trends in thirteenth-century Spanish Kabbalism is a modern reverberation of a view that was already expressed by some Jewish and Christian Kabbalists. However, it seems

that the modern scholar has introduced a qualification that cannot be detected in the earlier sources: Scholem regards Abulafia as the culmination or embodiment of a certain school of Spanish Kabbalah. Let us briefly consider this qualification.

Abulafia was born in Aragon and was educated, for significant segments of his life, in Catalonia. Especially important for our discussion is the fact that he started his kabbalistic studies and career in Spain. In Barcelona, in the early 1270s, he commenced his studies of the *Sefer Yetzirah* and its twelve commentaries, and it was then that he experienced what apparently was his first and most influential revelation.¹⁵ However, I doubt whether all these facts are sufficient to characterize Abulafia as a representative of a Spanish brand of Kabbalah, for several reasons.

The two main sources of the specific structure of ecstatic Kabbalah are Maimonidean philosophy on the one hand and Ashkenazi mystical techniques and esoterism on the other.¹⁶ There is some convincing evidence that one of the aims of these techniques was to attain a prophetic experience.¹⁷ The combination between the philosophical description of prophecy in Aristotelian terms and the Ashkenazi techniques and mystical aims, which is a very complex and not always harmonious task, is the main achievement of Abulafia as a mystical thinker. However, his studies of the *Guide of the Perplexed* took place in Capua, near Rome, with the Italian thinker R. Hillel of Verona long before he engaged in studies of Kabbalah.¹⁸ Maimonides' metaphysics and psychology became major spiritual factors in Abulafia's thought; Ashkenazi Hasidism contributed to ecstatic Kabbalah a vital element that was not accepted by any other theosophical-theurgical Spanish Kabbalist: applying techniques of combinations of letters as a means of attaining a paranormal experience.¹⁹ Although we may assume that Abulafia studied Ashkenazi texts in Spain,²⁰ those studies were far from typical of his contemporaries' concerns there.²¹ In proposing a synthesis between the views of the most important Jewish philosopher, who lived in Egypt, and some of the views of Hasidei Ashkenaz of northern Europe in order to create a form of Kabbalah, Abulafia performed an audacious move that had scarcely any organic connection to prevailing Spanish visions of Kabbalah. This idiosyncratic synthesis is, in my opinion, one of the most important reasons for Abulafia's failure to disseminate his Kabbalah in Spain, and perhaps also for his leaving the Iberian peninsula shortly after the beginning of his kabbalistic studies.

In this context is it perhaps significant that one of Abulafia's teachers in matters of Kabbalah was named R. Barukh Togarmi,²² namely someone coming from Turkey, a fact that points to the non-Spanish origin of some of Abulafia's main sources. Likewise, he highly appreciated another commentary on *Sefer Yetzirah*, by a certain R. Isaac of Bedresh, namely Béziers, apparently a Provençal master, whose combinatory techniques as preserved in Abulafia's writings are particularly close to

those of the Spanish Kabbalist.²³ Not only is the epithet "Spanish" doubtful, based as it is on a formal rather than a conceptual basis, but also the idea of ecstatic Kabbalah as a culmination of a Spanish school is premature. Scholem was correct in portraying the *Zohar* as such a culmination. However, in the case of Abulafia, it is difficult to see him as summarizing and perfecting elements that were characteristic of Spanish thought.²⁴ As a Kabbalist Abulafia was present in Spain for only three to four years, and so far I know of not one single Spanish Kabbalist who was substantially influenced by ecstatic Kabbalah.²⁵ Moreover, all of Abulafia's important writings were composed outside Spain.²⁶ And finally, Abulafia's Kabbalah was not only not accepted by the Spanish mystics; in fact it was openly and fiercely rejected by one influential figure in Spain, R. Shlomo ibn Adret, whose ban of Abulafia was so effective that it succeeded in wiping out this form of Kabbalah from Spanish soil and thus shaped to a certain degree the spiritual physiognomy of Spanish Kabbalah. In sum, not only did the components of ecstatic Kabbalah stem from trends of thought that emerged outside Spain, but this lore was divorced from the developments of Spanish Kabbalah and did not affect it. The vehemence of the assault by an eminent Kabbalist, the late fifteenth-century Rabbi Yehudah Hayyat, who was expelled from Spain, upon the dissemination of Abulafia's writings in northern Italy attests to the hostility of the Spanish Kabbalists, who gravitated around the Zoharic literature, toward ecstatic Kabbalah.²⁷

A comparative analysis of the phenomenological structure of ecstatic Kabbalah and Spanish theosophical Kabbalah may help us to see the basis for this hostility more clearly. The emphasis of Abulafia's Kabbalah upon the centrality of revelation and anomian mystical techniques, its specific eschatological attitude, and its individualistic approach are drastically different from the spiritual physiognomy of Spanish Kabbalism. The sources of these characteristics are not only the idiosyncratic personality of the founder of ecstatic Kabbalah but also the esoteric material that inspired him. Abulafia referred to his Kabbalah as a prophetic Kabbalah, as against the inferior, sefirotic one.²⁸ In slightly different forms, this distinction was echoed by Giovanni Pico della Mirandola and Johann Reuchlin.²⁹

However, instead of speaking about only two types of Spanish Kabbalah, we would do better to resort to the scheme of two trends in Jewish mysticism, starting before the thirteenth century. Abulafia was not only the founder of the ecstatic type of Kabbalism; as mentioned above, he was also the inheritor of mystical and magical techniques practiced by another, earlier type of Jewish mysticism, the Hasidei Ashkenaz,³⁰ which in turn was shaped by an even earlier type of Jewish ecstatic literature, the *Heikhalot* literature. He was influenced by another Ashkenazi figure, R. Nehemiah ben Shlomo, the Prophet of Erfurt, who did not belong to the group of Hasidei Ashkenaz, but relied on magical and *Heikhalot* traditions. On

the other side, the theosophical-theurgical Kabbalists in Spain inherited both the theosophical views of Provençal mysticism and much earlier types of theosophical and theurgical thought found mainly in rabbinic literature.³¹ These are the reasons why I would not describe his Kabbalah as a culmination of earlier developments in Spain.

6. ECSTATIC KABBALAH AFTER ABULAFIA

The numerous writings of Abraham Abulafia are the cornerstones of ecstatic Kabbalah; their influence can be detected in many texts, and they were preserved in a great number of manuscripts. However, very few of them have been printed, and those editions are replete with mistakes. Several important works written under the influence of Abulafian Kabbalah perpetuated and expanded the ideas and mystical techniques elaborated in the works of the master. The most important of these works are R. Nathan ben Sa'adyah Harar's *Sha'arei Tzedeq*, written in Messina by a disciple of Abulafia sometime before 1290; some of the writings of R. Isaac of Acre, dating from the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries; the kabbalistic traditions that R. Isaac collected from his master, R. Nathan ben Sa'adyah; the anonymous *Sefer ha-Tzeruf* and *Sefer Ner 'Elohim*, written in the late thirteenth century; and, at the beginning of the sixteenth century, R. Yehudah Albotini's *Sefer Sullam ha-'Aliyah*. Most of these books were written outside Spain.

Most of these works were composed either in the land of Israel or by authors who had lived there for a time.³² Some of these writings reflect the penetration of Sufic concepts, absent in the writings of Abulafia. For example, the concept of equanimity [hishtawwut], espoused in Damascus at the end of the thirteenth century by disciples of Ibn 'Arabi, appears in one of R. Isaac of Acre's works;³³ and the oral melodies that are part of Abulafia's mystical technique are accompanied by instrumental music in *Sefer Sha'arei Tzedeq*, a fact that apparently reflects the Sufic practice of *Sama'*, or mystical audition, and *dikhr*, a session of recitation of divine names.³⁴

After a long period of resistance to Abulafia's Kabbalah, the Spanish Kabbalists who arrived in the land of Israel after 1492 moved toward acceptance of its basic assumptions and toward combining it with the classical theosophical-theurgical Kabbalah regnant in Spain. Safedian Kabbalists such as R. Moshe Cordovero and R. Hayyim Vital in the sixteenth century were conspicuously influenced by Abulafia's views, which were now cited openly as a very high form of Kabbalah.³⁵ The dissemination of Cordovero's kabbalistic theories by his disciples in popular printed ethical writings helped some of Abulafia's religious ideals to reach a larger public and finally to play a formative role in the crystallization of eighteenth-century Polish Hasidism.³⁶ Clear traces of Abulafian influence are found in the

writings of one of the main followers of the Gaon of Vilnius, R. Elijah ben Shlomo, namely the nineteenth-century R. Menahem Mendel of Shklov.³⁷ More recently, Abulafia's Kabbalah has received widespread scholarly attention³⁸ and been printed and distributed even in the most orthodox Jewish circles. The main person responsible for the printing of thirteen volumes of Abulafia's and his followers' books, Amnon Gross, intends to facilitate the return of prophecy among Jews today.³⁹

ABRAHAM ABULAFIA'S ACTIVITY IN ITALY

1. ABULAFIA IN ROME

Rome played a very important role in the political and spiritual life of the Jews. The city symbolized both the evil Roman Empire, which destroyed the Jewish Second Temple, and the headquarters of the religion that later persecuted Jews more than any other—Christianity. This doubly negative heritage notwithstanding, in the medieval period Rome remained one of the main centers of power, regulating aspects of life in countries where many Jews were living. However, in the thirteenth century Rome was not only a symbol of past destruction and of present persecutions but also a center of Jewish spiritual creativity. In addition the city remained related, following some apocalyptic traditions in

Judaism, to eschatological events that were regarded as favorable for Jews and unfavorable for Christians.¹

In a religious dispute that took place in Barcelona in the early 1260s, the famous Nahmanides contended, in the context of a certain rabbinic legend concerning the messiah:

For here it is not stated that he had arrived, only that he was born on the day of the destruction [of the Temple]; for was it on the day that Moses was born that he immediately went to redeem Israel? He arrived only a number of days later, under the command of the Holy One blessed be He, and [then] said to Pharaoh, "Let my people go that they may serve Me" [Exodus 7:26]. So, too, when the end-time arrives the messiah will go to the pope under the command of God and say, "Let my people go that they may serve Me," and until that time we will not say regarding him that he arrived, for he is not yet the messiah.²

Moses' mission to the Pharaoh became the prototype for the future career of the messiah. According to Nahmanides, the messiah will also have to go to the most important ruler of his time and demand that he let the Jews leave. By dint of this typological reading, another aspect of Moses' encounters with the Pharaoh may be relevant to an understanding of the messiah's mission to Rome: the performance of miracles. As scholars have pointed out, Abulafia may have been influenced by Nahmanides' passage, and thus the parallel between the messiah and Moses as performers of miracles may also have been operative in the consciousness of the ecstatic Kabbalist. This messianic mission seems to be the background of Abulafia's intense literary activity and of his arrival in the city in 1280.

In the years 1279 and 1280, the founder of ecstatic Kabbalah composed several kabbalistic writings, which constitute, as far as we know, the first kabbalistic books composed in Italy. They consist of three major literary genres:

[a] Prophetic books, namely revelations having eschatological, often messianic, overtones, are presented as stemming from the Agent Intellect and addressed to Abulafia. The first of these, *Sefer ha-Yashar*, was written in 1279 in Patros, in Greece; but all the others, approximately seven, were written in Italy. In 1280 he composed *Sefer ha-Hayyim*, either in Capua or in Rome. In the same year he wrote in Rome *Sefer ha-Haftarah* and *Sefer ha-'Edut*. All the other prophetic books were composed in Sicily, where Abulafia himself composed a commentary on all these books. Although the prophetic books are now lost, their commentaries survived, and there we find quotations from the originals, which allow a reconstruction of their content.

[b] In 1280, before leaving for Rome, Abulafia composed in Capua a kabbalistic commentary on the *Guide of the Perplexed*, intended for his students there. This commentary, *Sefer Sitrei Torah*, is the last and most important of three commentaries that he wrote on the *Guide* and is widely available in manuscript form.³ In a commentary on the *Guide* written six years earlier, he wrote:

I am today in the city of Phonon,⁴ and four precious stones joined my academy. . . . God bestowed on these four children [his students] knowledge and intelligence in order to understand every book and science, and this is the reason I have brought them closer as far as I could, and I invented for them the names Daniel, Hananyah, Mishael, and 'Azaryah, and I called the last Zekharyahu,⁵ and they are children with no deficiency, good-looking and understanding every science and knowing knowledge, and having the capacity to stand in the palace of the king . . . and those four children . . . when they come to shelter under the wings of the Shekhinah, false witnesses . . . attempted to seduce them from the table of the Lord, the God of Israel, in order not to be nourished from the splendor of the Shekhinah,⁶ at the time when other men consume grass⁷ . . . and they came and implored and asked me to interpret the secrets of the *Guide of the Perplexed*, together with some secrets of the Torah that are in my hands, dealing with very profound matters, in order to have a proof and merit and mouth and recommender in order to extract some wisdom to which their souls were ardently striving, to know it and comprehend its essence in order to know their creator. And they implored me very much to this effect . . . and I, because of my love of them, did not want to refuse them, and I fulfilled their desire according to their wish, and I composed this commentary for them and for those similar to them.⁸

Thus Abulafia started rather early in his career to teach youngsters, *yeladim*, not only according to the linear method, but also according to the more advanced method of reading the *Guide*, best exemplified by the very book he wrote at their request. In fact, many years earlier, around 1273, when he himself was no more than thirty-three, he taught Gikatilla, a young man aged twenty-five, his advanced method of studying the *Guide*. In the same period he also taught the *Guide* to two other young persons in Spain, R. Shem Tov and R. Yehudah Salmon.

[c] In 1280 Abulafia composed in Rome a kabbalistic handbook, *Sefer Hayyei ha-'Olam ha-Ba'*, another classic of Kabbalah if we are to judge from the number of extant manuscripts and quotations from it in other works.⁹ In

Rome Abulafia taught the *Guide* to two old men, R. Tzidqiah and R. Isaiah, whom he calls his "allies"—an indication that he had some troubles there—and describes as being successful.¹⁰ R. Isaiah of Trani the second was one of the most important halakhic figures in Italy of that generation. R. Tzidqiah may have been the son of R. Benjamin, belonging to the eminent 'Anav family; a less plausible candidate is the more famous R. Tzidqiah ben Abraham, the author of *Sefer Shibbolei ha-Leqet*.¹¹ By any standards, during the two years or less of his second visit in Italy, Abulafia was busy indeed, even more so if we remember that he also taught in Capua and spent some time in Rome trying to gain an audience with Pope Nicholas III as part of a messianic enterprise. This intensive literary activity is also related to the fact that in 1280 Abulafia reached the age of forty, which was regarded as the age when a person attained wisdom.¹²

Thus we may safely conclude that Capua and Rome were the first cities in Italy where ecstatic Kabbalah was taught and where important kabbalistic books were composed.

2. ABULAFIA AND NICHOLAS III

Abulafia's overt and determined attempt to meet Pope Nicholas III had messianic implications. In August 1279, on the eve of the Jewish New Year, he pursued the pontiff, a member of the Orsini family, to the family's summer residence in the castle of Soriano da Cimini.

And during the fifth month following Nisan, the eleventh month following Tishrei, [namely] the month of 'Av, during the tenth year, he [Abulafia] arrived in Rome. He intended to go before the pope on the eve of *Rosh ha-Shanah*. And the pope commanded all the guards of his house, when he was in Soriano, a city one day's distance from Rome, that should Raziel¹³ come to speak with him in the name of Judaism, that they take him immediately, and that he not see him at all but that he be taken outside the city and burned alive, and there is the wood, inside the inner gate of the city. And this matter was made known to Raziel, and he paid no attention to the words of those who said this, but practiced concentration¹⁴ and saw visions and wrote them down, and thus came about this book, which he called *Sefer ha-'Edut* [Book of Testimony], being a testimony on behalf of himself and God, that he gave his life for the sake of the love of His commandments, being also a testimony on behalf of God, who rescued him from the hand of his foe. For on the day that he went before the pope two mouths were born to him, and when he entered the outer gate of the city a messenger went out to greet him

and informed him that the one who sought to destroy his soul had died the previous night; he was suddenly smitten by a plague, and on that night he was slain and died. And Raziel was saved.¹⁵

The Latin sources describing the death of Nicholas III speak unanimously about an apoplexy, which killed the pope abruptly before a confessor could be brought.¹⁶ Abulafia was arrested and kept in custody for two weeks. As soon as he was liberated he left the peninsula for a decade of febrile literary and messianic activities in Sicily. When reporting the circumstances of his attempt to meet with the pope, Abulafia does not explain the cause of his sudden death. However, his account contains traces of a tension between the pope and a messiah; the pontiff warned the messiah that he would be burned, and the death of the pope is portrayed as the reason for the messiah's rescue. What did Abulafia want to achieve by this encounter? I assume that the answer is complex, and we shall deal with it in chapter 6. Here let me adduce an interesting passage from the same "prophetic book" quoted above, the *Commentary on Sefer ha-'Edut*. Abulafia introduces the brief statements revealed to him, which constituted parts of the lost original prophetic book, followed by his commentary. The supernal power, whose identity is the cosmic power known in Maimonides as the Agent Intellect, is the source of the revelation to Abulafia, and he refers to himself in the third person:

He said that he was in Rome at that time, and they told him what was to be done and what was to be said in his name, and that he should tell everyone that "God is king, and shall stir up the nations," and the retribution of those who rule instead of Him. And he [the Agent Intellect] informed him [Abulafia] that he [again Abulafia] was king, and he changed [himself] from day to day, and his degree was above that of all degrees, for in truth he was deserving such. But he returned and again made him take an oath when he was staying in Rome on the river Tiber. . . . And the meaning of his saying "Rise and lift up the head of my anointed one" refers to the life of the souls. "And on the New Year and in the Temple"—it is the power of the souls. And he says, "Anoint him as a king"—anoint him like a king with the power of all the names. "For I have anointed him as a king over Israel"—over the communities of Israel, that is, the commandments.¹⁷

It is in Rome—as Abulafia was told according to the plain sense of the revelation—that the anointment of the king will take place at the New Year, in the Temple. As we have learned from the same book, Abulafia attempted to see the pope on the eve of the Jewish New Year. The plain meaning of the attempt to become messiah and king at the New Year is that when speaking with the pope Abulafia will

fulfill a messianic mission and become the messiah. Was the "temple" no other than St. Peter's? In any case, Abulafia interprets this plain sense of the revelation allegorically, to point to the emergence of the intellect, which is the spiritual messiah, just as the person speaking with the pope is the material messiah.¹⁸ The allegorical/spiritual interpretation of his own revelation is similar to some psychologically oriented Aristotelian interpretations of the Bible in thirteenth-century Jewish philosophy, although Abulafia seems to be the only Kabbalist to have composed a text that would subsequently be interpreted by the author himself.¹⁹ But what is more interesting for the present context is the consonance with the general cultural trend in Rome, and I assume in Italy in general, where openness to philosophy stemming from either Arabic or Scholastic sources was greater than what is known to have existed among Spanish contemporaries. This consonance between the intellectual aspect of the Abulafian Kabbalah and the philosophically oriented culture in Italy and Sicily is surely one of the reasons for the relative success of Abulafia in Italy, and much less in Provence, in contrast to his total marginalization in Spain.

3. A RETROSPECTIVE VISION

Several years later, sometime between 1286 and 1288, in his *Sefer ha-'Ot*, one of his prophetic-messianic writings, recording one of the most interesting apocalypses ever written in Hebrew, Abulafia addresses the death of the pope in a manner that is unparalleled in his other writings:

All the rulers of the small Rome,
Their strength has failed and diminished.
Its validity is from the day of the revelation
Of the Torah and further, and there is no
Ruler over His tribes.
Demons come to kill,
But goats were killed.²⁰
And there were delivered to slaughter nowadays
Both their nobles and humble ones
By the young and the gentle king.
His enemy died in Rome [merivo met be-Romi]
In his rebellion [be-miryo], by the power of the Name
'El Hay ve-Qayam, because
The Tetragrammaton fought him
By Land and Sea.²¹

These enigmatic lines need a lengthier interpretation than is possible here. For now, let me start with the most conspicuous element: Abulafia speaks about an

enemy who died in Rome, killed by the divine name. Although the pope in fact died in Soriano, I see no better alternative to identifying the anonymous enemy than the pontiff. Why his death is translated to Rome becomes clearer when we analyze the Hebrew: *merivo met be-Romi be-miryo*. *Merivo*, “his enemy,” contains the same consonants as *be-Romi*, “in Rome,” and as *be-miryo*, “in his rebellion”; the use of the same four consonants in such proximity inevitably reinforces the poetic dimension of the description and may account for Abulafia’s choice to name Rome as the crucial city. As for Abulafia’s claim in 1288 that the pope died “by the power of the Name, *’El Hai ve-Qayam*,” the context implies the agency of a “gentle and young king,” namely a human figure, which is probably Abulafia himself. The lines immediately following make the connection clear:

Against YHWH and against His messiah
This will be a sign and a proof
And a faithful testimony,
Because we have been victorious, by the name BYT.²²

I interpret the mention of the messiah as a reference to Abulafia himself, who is also the “gentle king.” The death of the enemy is therefore a proof of the power of God and His messiah; apparently both used the divine name(s) in order to kill an enemy: the Tetragrammaton and the name *’EHeYeH*, present in the last verse by the name BYT, which amounts in gematria to 21, like *’EHeYeH*. Abulafia’s prophetic Kabbalah gravitates around the divine names and their use in order to reach an ecstatic experience. However, divine names were conceived of as powerful linguistic units, used by prophets who had been sent by God to perform a certain mission, as we shall see in the following chapters. Therefore, from the perspective of an older Abulafia, the accidental death of the pope, with whom he wanted to discuss the meaning of the authentic Judaism, which is the knowledge of the divine names, has become the proof of his victory. The death of the pope is construed as a confrontation between the messiah and the pope, and the former used the divine name in order to kill the latter. This retrospective account is far from reflecting what in fact happened in Soriano, even in Abulafia’s first report of the affair, quoted above; it may instead reflect Abulafia’s increasing confidence in his messianic mission.

The occurrence of the name *’EHeYeH* in connection with the killing of the pope is reminiscent of another killing performed by a redemptive figure: Moses’ killing of the Egyptian. According to the biblical version, Moses killed the Egyptian who oppressed the Jews by physical force. However, according to some midrashic statements, Moses used the divine name in order to perform this act.

Let me return once more to the permutations of letters *merivo*, *be-Romi*, *be-miryo*. I find no more permutations of these consonants elsewhere in Abulafia’s verse. I

suggest that here Abulafia hints at two divine names that were very important in his writings: BM and RYW are permutations of the same consonants, and they stand for namely the name of 42, MB, and the name of 72 units of three letters, which amount to 216, namely RYW. Indeed, the knowledge of precisely these two names is described as an important mystical tradition to be handed down in order to reach a divine revelation.²³

4. ABULAFIA’S ACTIVITY IN SICILY

While in Rome and its vicinity in 1279 and 1280, Abulafia produced conspicuously influential contributions to Kabbalah, much more so than anything he had written before. After his release from two weeks’ detention in prison at the hands of the Minorites, he departed for Sicily, where he spent the remaining eleven or so years of his life. There he produced another 2,000 pages of equally influential work, some of it still available only in manuscript. This corpus enlarges our understanding of Abulafia’s students in Messina and Palermo, and of the reverberations of Abulafia’s writings during the Renaissance.

Abulafia was already in Messina in 1282, as we learn from his commentary on *Sefer ’Ish ’Adam*, where he mentions several of his students there: R. Natronay, R. Abraham ben Shalom, R. Nathan ben Sa’adyah Harar, R. Sa’adyah ben Yitzhaq Sigilmasi, and R. Jacob ben Abraham.²⁴ According to Abulafia’s account, these students—with the sole exception of the mysterious Rabbi Natronay—came to him one after another, apparently attracted by what they had heard from their acquaintances; thus we may infer that in 1282 he had already been in Messina for a substantial period. Between 1282 and 1284 it seems that two more students from Messina joined his study group and then the majority of his students left him. According to *Sefer ’Otzar ’Eden Ganuz*, his longest book, composed in Messina in 1285/1286,

Indeed, in this town that I am within now, called Senim,²⁵ which [actually is] Messina, I have found six persons, and with me I brought the seventh, from whom they [the six] have learned in my presence for a very short while. Each of them has received something from me, more or less, and all of them have left me, except the one, who is the first, and [he is also] the first reason for what each and every one of his friends has learned from my mouth. His name is Rabbi Sa’adyah ben Rabbi Yitzhaq Sigilmasi, blessed be his memory. He was followed by Rabbi Abraham ben Rabbi Shalom, and was followed by Rabbi Jacob, his son, and later was followed by Rabbi Yitzhaq his friend, and he was followed by the friend of his friend . . . and the name of the seventh was Rabbi Natronay Tzarfati, blessed be his memory.²⁶

One more person has been added to the earlier list but during the same time one of the important original figures in Abulafia's group has died: Rabbi Natronay Tzarfati. However, when Abulafia wrote this passage only one of his seven disciples remained with the master: Rabbi Sa'adyah Sigilmasi, to whom the book is dedicated. Abulafia continues:

At the beginning of the year 5046²⁷ God has desired me, and He has brought me into His holy palace, at the very time when I have completed this book, which I have composed here in Messina, for the dear, honorable, pleasant, intelligent, and wise student, who desires to know the essence of the perfect Torah, Rabbi Sa'adyah. . . . Him I have seen as adhering to me in love; for him [I wrote this book] in order that he will have it in his hands, as a memory of what he has studied with me, for oblivion is common. Likewise, while it will be in his hands, I know that it will be of benefit also to his friends . . . an intellectual benefit to them as well as to others like them, by most of the things written in it.²⁸

The master's unambiguous praise of Rabbi Sa'adyah is surely related to the fact that he alone was not deterred by some events that had caused his friends to leave. Abulafia continues:

I know that without [the occurrence of] those events [related] to the fantasies that I saw in my first visions, which have, God be praised, already passed, those above-mentioned students would not have separated from me. But those fantasies, which were the reasons for their departure and their distancing from me, are the very divine reasons that have caused me to stand as I am and to withstand the ordeals.²⁹

Abulafia is clearly sensitive to the desertion of his Sicilian students. He stoically accepts their temporary disengagement but assumes that his devoted follower, Rabbi Sa'adyah, will impart to them the content of the book that he, Abulafia, has written. Nourishing this patient attitude was his understanding that a certain event may appear in a different light to a person who experiences it internally than it appears to others. I assume that Abulafia was referring to the consequences of his revelations: whereas he was encouraged by the revelations, the students were apparently frightened. This calm attitude toward the departure of his students apparently had a positive result: three years later, in the introduction to his commentary on the Bible, Abulafia again mentions R. Abraham ben Shalom and R. Nathan ben Sa'adyah, together with R. Sa'adyah Sigilmasi, as being among those who accept his leadership.³⁰ Moreover, he dedicated one of his most important books, *Sefer 'Or ha-Sekhel*, to R. Abraham and to R. Nathan the Wise.³¹ In the

same year, 1289, Abulafia dedicated another of his books, *Sefer ha-Hesheq*, to a certain R. Jacob ben Abraham. It therefore follows that Abulafia had been able to reestablish good relations with at least three of his students. Moreover, in 1287 we learn of another student who is not mentioned up to that point, nor at any time afterward. I am referring to Rabbi Shlomo ben Moshe ha-Kohen from the Galilee. To him Abulafia dedicated his commentary on the priestly blessing, *Sefer Shomer Mitzwah*.³² Thus we may conclude that after a certain crisis, apparently provoked by strange events connected to his ecstatic experiences, Abulafia was able to attract again some of his former students. It seems that all of them were living in Messina, and the fact that he dedicated almost all of the books he wrote in Sicily to these students indicates that he spent most of the period 1280–1291 in Messina.

Nonetheless, it seems that he also established some sort of relationship with some of the Jewish inhabitants of Palermo. In 1289 he mentions Rabbi 'Ahituv ben Yitzhaq and Rabbi David his brother, Rabbi Shlomo ben Rabbi David, and Rabbi Shlomo he-Hazan ben Rabbi Yakhin.³³ With the exception of R. Shlomo he-Hazan, all the people of Palermo are described as being physicians. According to the same testimony, these people, like his students in Messina, followed his guidance. The "physicians" of Palermo are mentioned only very late during Abulafia's stay in Sicily, probably as late as 1288, and in the same year he dedicated one book to two of his Messina students, whereas no book of Abulafia's that we know of was ever dedicated to a disciple from Palermo. This situation seems rather strange, since all those described as his Palermo students were part of the Jewish upper class, while none of his Messina students is described as playing any role in the Jewish community. This imbalance in the politics of book-dedication reflects, in my opinion, Abulafia's somewhat later acquaintance with the Palermo group. But there may also be another reason for this reticence.

Toward the end of his life, apparently in the last four years, Abulafia was involved in a bitter controversy with the greatest authority on Jewish religious law of Aragonese Jewry, Rabbi Shlomo ben Abraham ibn Adret of Barcelona. This seminal controversy, neglected in the scholarship of Kabbalah, was apparently precipitated by a fierce assault on Abulafia's messianic and prophetic claims, mounted by Ibn Adret in an epistle he sent to a number of people in Palermo.³⁴ Although there are good reasons to assume that Ibn Adret later wrote to Messina as well,³⁵ his decision to open his attack on Abulafia with a letter to Palermo may be an indication of Abulafia's weaker influence in that city. In any case, the existence of such an influence seems incontrovertible. This may be learned both from Abulafia's own testimony and from that of Ibn Adret, who indicates that Abulafia had a very dangerous impact on several communities in Sicily.³⁶ This impact is to be sought on two different levels: Abulafia was a propagandist of his peculiar type

of ecstatic Kabbalah, but also of his claim to be a prophet and messiah. It seems that it was the latter claim that provoked Ibn Adret's fiery response. If further documents should reveal more substantial evidence for Abulafia's influence as a messiah, we would have a better framework for the other messianic documents, which originated in Sicily.

Let me emphasize a particular trait of Abulafia's group of disciples in Messina, which in fact is characteristic of the Jewish culture in Sicily in general. Abulafia, who was an Aragonese Jew, apparently brought with him a French disciple—Rabbi Natronay. In Messina his most devoted follower was Rabbi Sa'adyah Sigilmasi, a North African Jew. For a while Abulafia also had a student from the Galilee,³⁷ while Rabbi Abraham ben Shalom was originally from Comti, a small island not far from Malta. This collection of individuals testifies to the variety of Abulafia's group—a veritable international school of Jewish mysticism, and perhaps the first one. Abulafia's presence in Sicily transformed the island into more than just the outstanding place for studying ecstatic Kabbalah. Abulafia sent at least two of his kabbalistic writings from Sicily to Spain: one letter to Ibn Adret's colleague in Barcelona, Rabbi Yehudah Salmon,³⁸ and *Sefer ha-'Ot*;³⁹ an epistle to a certain Rabbi Abraham, who was apparently living in Malta or in Comti;⁴⁰ and one of his books, *Sefer Shomer Mitzvah*, dedicated to Rabbi Shlomo ha-Kohen, who took it with him when he left Sicily.⁴¹ Sicily, and more precisely Messina, thus became a center for the dissemination of a distinctive type of Kabbalah to other regions of the Mediterranean. This dissemination has much to do with the exoteric vision of Kabbalah embraced by Abulafia, who asserted explicitly that “despite the fact that I know that there are many Kabbalists who are not perfect, thinking as they are that their perfection consists in not revealing a secret issue, I shall care neither about their thought nor about their blaming me because of the disclosure, since my view on this is very different from, and even opposite to, theirs.”⁴²

Immediately afterward Abulafia “discloses” the view that the *Ma'aseh Merkavah*, the Account of the Chariot, which is one of the most important esoteric topics in Jewish mysticism, should be understood neither as a visionary experience, as in the first chapter of Ezekiel, nor as an allegory for metaphysics, as in Maimonides, but as a matter of a combination of letters of the divine names, namely as a technique of interpretation, and perhaps also as a mystical technique. The more exoteric propensity, as expressed here in such explicit terms, would remain a major characteristic of Kabbalah in Italy.

As mentioned above, R. Shlomo ibn Adret made great efforts to counteract Abulafia's influence in Sicily. In response the latter distanced himself from theosophical Kabbalah, including its specific formulation in Nahmanides' and thus Ibn Adret's school, namely that the ten sefirot constitute the very essence of the

divine. Abulafia contended that this was a view worse than the Christian trinitarian belief, as it assumed the existence of a more complex plurality in the divine realm.⁴³ The sharp exchange between the two Kabbalists is emblematic of the more general schism between ecstatic Kabbalah, which remained influential in Italy, Byzantium, and the land of Israel, and theosophical Kabbalah in Spain. Spanish Kabbalists were also much more inclined to an esoteric approach to Kabbalah, an approach rejected by Abulafia and his students. The fact that Abulafia dedicated most of his books to Sicilian Jews may account for the preservation of many of these books—some, like *Sefer 'Or ha-Sekhel*, in quite a number of manuscripts. Whether Abulafia was able to establish a school that continued the study of his particular kind of Kabbalah is a question that cannot be answered conclusively. What is more important is that some of his writings were available at the end of the fifteenth century, and were interesting enough to attract the attention of several authors who were instrumental in the emergence of Christian Kabbalah. It seems that the role of Sicily in the transmission of Abulafia's Kabbalah may be greater than that of a mere repository of kabbalistic manuscripts. The fact that a convert to Christianity, Paulus de Heredia, who came from Spain to Sicily, quotes Abulafia explicitly cannot be explained by his knowledge of Kabbalah while in Spain.⁴⁴ Because of Abulafia's stay on the island, it became a center of his Kabbalah in his lifetime and for two centuries afterward.

ECSTATIC KABBALAH AS AN EXPERIENTIAL LORE

1. ON ABULAFIA'S MYSTICAL TECHNIQUES

The nature of Kabbalah is a matter of dispute among scholars. Focusing their attention on theosophical-theurgical Kabbalah, a preeminently Spanish type of Kabbalah, some modern scholars have pointed out the “casuistical” nature of Kabbalah as a whole.¹ Part of this evaluation has to do with the marginalization of Abulafia’s Kabbalah in the scholarship after the mid-1950s, despite Gershom Scholem’s characterization of ecstatic Kabbalah as a major trend.² This marginalization is part of a larger phenomenon that can be described as a more theological approach to Kabbalah, which was conceived of more as a speculative system than as a full-fledged form of mysticism. This trend especially affected the writings of Abulafia, some of which were dedicated to describing mystical techniques.³

In ancient Jewish mysticism, the *Heikhalot* literature, there were already articulated forms of mystical techniques, intended to enable the mystical ascent of the soul to the supernal Chariot, the *Merkavah*. They included recitations of divine names and hymns, which apparently induced a peculiar state of consciousness. Some of these elements were still discernible among the Ashkenazi Hasidic masters of the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries, who were also interested in ecstatic experiences. However, elaborated descriptions of mystical paths seem to have been an innovation by Abulafia, who included some older elements found in the Ashkenazi texts he studied, with some details whose origins are still obscure. Abulafia proposed several mystical techniques, which differed from one another in several substantial details. In general we may describe his technique as including a basic element of reciting letters of the divine names in an isolated room⁴ while in a state of mental concentration.⁵ So, for example, we read in one of his epistles: “whoever wants to come into the Temple and enter to its inmost part has to sanctify himself by the sanctification of the high priest and to study and teach and keep and do, until he is perfect in his ethical and intellectual attributes, and then he should seclude himself⁶ in order to receive the prophetic influx from the mouth of the Power [*Gevurah*].”⁷ Isolation is a necessary preparation for the practice of recitation of the divine names. Recitation is to be performed in accordance with certain rules, and the mystic is required to intone the permutations of letters according to the tonality indicated by the vowels of the permuted consonants. At the same time the mystic uses a pattern of breathing reminiscent of that used by Hindu Yoga; some of Abulafia’s handbooks explain movements of the head and hands in detail. In one of these handbooks we find the following recommendations:

Direct your face toward the Name, which is mentioned, and sit as though a man is standing before you and waiting for you to speak with Him, and He is ready to answer you concerning whatever you may ask him, and you say, “Speak,” and he answers. . . . And begin then to pronounce, and recite first “the head of the head” [namely the first combination of letters], drawing out the breath and at great ease; and afterward go back as if the one standing opposite you is answering you, and you yourself answer, changing your voice, so that the answer not be similar to the question. And do not extend the answer at all, but say it easily and calmly, and in response recite one letter of the Name as it actually is.⁸

The recitation of the divine name is to be done in a melodious manner, as we learn already from one of the sources of Abulafia’s mystical techniques, the Ashkenazi Hasidim. R. Eleazar of Worms writes: “And the prophet was singing songs to the Holy One, blessed be He, and out of the joy of the commandment⁹ the

speech was coming, as it is said: 'I rejoice at thy word' [Psalms 119:162]."¹⁰ Singing songs to God is by no means an extraordinary concept in Judaism.¹¹ However, the song mentioned here deals with producing a kind of joy that induces the emergence of prophetic speech, perhaps reflecting a stand closer to some midrashic images, in which prophets are described as those "who were like an instrument full of speech."¹² Elsewhere, when resorting to the same talmudic passage in Sabbath, Rabbi Eleazar describes the enhancing of the glory that is revealed to the prophets who praise God.¹³ These views are similar to Abulafia's. Here is how he describes "prophecy," a term that is often used in his writings to characterize an ecstatic experience:

The proof that song indicates the degree of prophecy is that it is the way of song to make the heart happy by means of tunes, as it is said: "And when the minstrel played, the spirit of the Lord came upon him" [2 Kings 3:15], for prophecy does not dwell in him [unless there is] joy.¹⁴ This was already hinted at in two words appearing at the end of Ecclesiastes [12:13], where it is said: "The end of the matter, all being heard: Fear God, and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man." Join *yare'* [fear] with *shamar* [keep], and you find *shir 'amar* [say a song]. There is a hint [of this] in "and they shall put my name upon the children of Israel, and I will bless them" [Numbers 6:27].¹⁵

The last part of this passage is based upon the gematria of 751, by which *yare'* *shamar* = *shir 'amar* = 'et shemi (my name). Abulafia equates the two verbs, which denote awe and obedience, with recitation of the song on the one hand and with the divine name on the other. Blessing stands here for the descent of prophecy, in a manner that differs from the blessing in theosophical-theurgical Kabbalah. The nexus between the song, *shirah*, and prophecy is the culmination of a much longer discussion, which portrays the Song of Songs as Solomon's last and most sublime composition, and points to the spiritual attainment of the author and to the mystical death by a kiss.¹⁶ In general, Abulafia assumes that the biblical songs, such as the songs of Moses and Deborah, point to metaphysical topics and to the intellectual human faculty.¹⁷ This view seems to be related to a theory found in an anonymous commentary on the Jewish liturgy, contemporary with Abulafia, to the effect that the secret of the Song of Songs is the secret of the combination of letters, a central technique in Abulafia's Kabbalah.¹⁸

It seems that the psychological processes that are characteristic of Abulafia's techniques are different from parallel processes used in other forms of mysticism that are similar in some respects to ecstatic Kabbalah. In lieu of attaining tranquilization of the mind by fixing the mental processes on a static point, Abulafia

proposed contemplation of an object that is changing all the time. In his system, the release of the consciousness from alien thoughts that may disturb the unitive or revelatory experiences is obtained by an overactivation of the mental faculty, not by its fixation.¹⁹

2. FEELINGS: PLEASURE AND DEATH

In Abulafia's writings and those of his followers, there are several descriptions of bodily feeling during the mystical experience. So, for example, we learn in one of his first books that "I see that unto Him [God], the quintessence of all experience arrives as there comes from Him all the wisdom of logic [and] to every intellective soul [comes] the pleasure of vision."²⁰ Pleasure recurs in a much more elaborated manner in a book composed in Messina in 1285–86: "And you shall feel in yourself an additional spirit arousing you and passing over your entire body and causing you pleasure, and it shall seem to you as if balm has been placed upon you, from your head to your feet, one or more times, and you shall rejoice and enjoy it very much, with gladness and trembling: gladness to your soul and trembling of your body, like one who rides rapidly on a horse, who is happy and joyful, while the horse trembles beneath him."²¹

Abulafia conceives physical pleasure as an appropriate feeling and does not hesitate to express this feeling. He does not suggest anywhere that this image is an inappropriate one to its subject; on this point, Abulafia departs radically from Maimonides, who, following Aristotle, sees the apprehension of the divine as the highest goal of human activity; the joy that accompanies it is only a side effect of this activity.²² Abandoning Maimonides in this respect, Abulafia crystallized an approach, apparently based upon personal experience, that there is an additional stage to the acquisition of intellectual perfection—namely, that of the pleasure deriving from the mystical experience.

Maimonides avoided mentioning pleasure as a symptom of a sublime experience; this reticence may be part of his more transcendental theology, which separates intellect from matter. His effort to push God beyond the range, though not beyond the scope, of human understanding in order to safeguard His utmost purity and spirituality exacted a price in the realms of both epistemology and feeling: the human intellect, connected as it is with matter, cannot experience the divine nature, though He is purely intellectual. It was only in the moment of death that the few elite, Moses and the patriarchs, were able to attain the kiss of bliss, that is, an experience of God, as we learn from the *Guide of the Perplexed*.²³ Transcendence has its sublime moments, for which the philosopher often pays in the form of a very modest noetic attainment of the absolute intellectual realm. Thus the divine unitive experiences were not conceived as possible in his system,

and it may well be that Maimonides was deliberately resistant to the Neoplatonic views on the cleaving of the soul to God and to the Averroistic unitive noetics.²⁴ Abulafia, however, assumes that the “death by a kiss” of the patriarchs, an experience attested in hoary antiquity, should be seen in a much more exemplary and relevant way. He asserts that “whoever’s soul is separated from him at the time of pronouncing [the divine name] will die by a kiss.”²⁵ The prerogative of the few perfecti in the past, according to the view of Maimonides, was turned into the immediate achievement of the extreme mystics, available in the present. The secrets of the *Guide of the Perplexed* are described as redemptive matters: “all the secrets to which he pays attention to understand them, by a [concentrated] speculation, and to understand the intention intended by them, and ‘he will be redeemed’ [Leviticus 25:31].”²⁶

Abulafia construes the verse in Hebrew, *Ge’ulah tihieh lo*, in his own particular way: redemption will be attained by means of the thirty-six secrets, hinted at by the Hebrew letters *lo*, meaning “him,” which amount in gematria to 36. Here the nexus between secrets and redemption is explicit. A similar position can also be found in his first commentary on these secrets, *Sefer ha-Ge’ulah*, where he identifies the “life of the soul” with the “life of the next world,” referring to *hasagah*, comprehension.²⁷ This view occurs also in his second commentary on the *Guide*, titled *Sefer Hayyei ha-Nefesh*,²⁸ and it should be understood in a noneschatological framework: the next world is not the realm of existence after death, but the ecstatic experience in this world, as we learn from one of his most important books, *Hayyei ha-Olam ha-Ba*’ (The Life of the Next World). We witness here an important instance of the spiritualization of traditional eschatological terminology, interpreted in terms of imminent individual salvation, a phenomenon well known in the history of mysticism, as in Sufism for example. In this context, another observation of Abulafia’s may be relevant: he states that the number of chapters of the *Guide* is 177, a number that is equivalent to the numerical value of *Gan ‘Eden*, namely Paradise.²⁹

3. THE DIALOGUE WITH THE “ANGEL”

As we have already seen above in the quotation from *Sefer ha-Hesheq*, when practicing the mystical technique the mystic is to expect someone to speak with him. Indeed, an angelic revelation in the form of a man is described several times in Abulafia’s writings. So, for example, we read in his untitled book:

“I am the angel of the God of the hosts, so and so, and it is the secret of *Gan ‘Eden* that amounts to three names, *YHWH ‘Adonai’ Elohim*, whose vowels are the ‘prince of *Gan ‘Eden*’ . . . and he will tell him: ‘I am the tree of life, the Garden in *Eden* from the East.’ And he will understand that God has sent to

him His angel in order to help him by instruction, and to accustom him in the strong love of the Creator, by announcing to him the truth of the essence of the tree of life that is within the Garden, and he is the ‘prince of *Gan ‘Eden*.’”³⁰

We may assume that this angel is no other than Gabriel: “The angel who advises you of the secret of God is named Gabriel, and he speaks from the first verse of the holy name mentioned by you, and he shows you the wonders of prophecy, for that is the secret of ‘In a vision I will make myself known to him, in a dream I will speak to him’ [Numbers 12:6], for ‘vision,’ which is the secret of the verse, equals Gabriel, and ‘dream,’ whose secret [namely numerical valence] is ‘Edo, is Enoch.’”³¹ Here one finds the gematria for *Gavriel* = 246 = *pasuq* (verse) = *mar’eh* (vision) = *medabber* (speaks), and these expressions allude to the cosmic Agent Intellect. Consequently, in the prophetic vision the mystic sees “the figure of a human” by means of the Agent Intellect, a revelation accompanied by speech. We infer the connection between this figure, which is the reason for the response, and the person speaking from Abulafia’s own words, who describes this situation as an answer given by man to himself. It follows that we may reasonably assume that the human form is no more than a projection of the soul or intellect of the mystic, who carries on a dialogue with it at the time of pronunciation.

Later in his *Hayyei ha-Olam ha-Ba*’ Abulafia describes a detail of the technique, which has an implication for the dialogic situation: “Hold your head evenly, as if it were on the balance pans of a scale, in the manner in which you would speak with a man who was as tall as yourself, evenly, face to face.”³² The ontic status of this figure may be inferred from Abulafia’s earlier comments in the same work: “We, the community of Israel, the congregation of the Lord, know in truth that God, may He be praised, is neither a body nor a power within the body, nor will He ever be corporealized. But at the time that the prophet prophesies, his abundance creates a corporeal intermediary, which is the angel.”³³ What is the psychological mechanism that brings about this dialogical vision? According to his book *Or ha-Sekhel*, “because man is composed of many powers, it is necessary that he see the influx in his intellect, and that vision is called by the name Intellectual Apprehension. And the influx will further jump to the imagination, and require that the imagination apprehend that which is in its nature to apprehend, and see in the image of corporeality imagined as spirituality combined with it; and that force will be called Man or Angel or the like.”³⁴

In a later passage the intellect, namely the “inner speech,” is described as reflecting itself within the imagination just as the soul sees itself within the lower forms, in what seems to be an appropriation of a Neoplatonic stand: “For every inner speech is none other than a picture alone, and that is the picture which is

common to the intellect and the imagination. Therefore, when the soul sees the forms which are below it, it immediately sees itself depicted therein.”³⁵

Some form of duality is implied here; the higher entity, namely the intellect, reveals itself within the lower, the imagination, and this seems to be another form of explaining the nature of prophecy.

4. *DEVEQUT: THE MYSTICAL IDEAL OF ECSTATIC KABBALAH*

Beginning in the early thirteenth century, Kabbalah concerned itself with the ideal of cleaving to the various divine manifestations, the sefirot, as part of the mystical performance of the commandments. In the second half of the century, however, the Spanish Kabbalists became less and less interested in this ideal, emphasizing instead the paramount importance of the theurgical performance of the commandments as a mystical way to the divine. With Abulafia, the situation was fundamentally different: he considered the commandments as allegories for the spiritual processes of the mystic, rather than as techniques to attain an altered state of consciousness. Whereas the normian, halakhic way of life was considered the main mystical avenue open to all the Jews, the ecstatic Kabbalah of Abulafia and his followers was grounded in anomian mystical techniques, whose ultimate purpose was to attain a state of union with the divine, an interpretation of the biblical imperative to cleave to God.³⁶ This imperative was reinterpreted by means of Aristotelian epistemology as pointing to the unitive state of the intellect and the intelligibles during the act of intellection. Since the intelligible of the mystic is, according to Abulafia, the cosmic active intellect, or God as an intelligizing entity, intelligizing God is tantamount to becoming identical with Him at the time of intellection. This mystical understanding of Aristotle influenced the later formulations of the states of *unio mystica* as elaborated in the Safedian and Hasidic Polish masters. So, for example, we learn from one of Abulafia’s commentaries on his prophetic writings:

just as his Master³⁷ who is detached from all matter is called the Knowledge, the Knower, and the Known, all at the same time, since all three are one in Him, so shall he, the exalted man, the master of the exalted Name, be called intellect, while he is actually knowing; then he is also “the known” like his Master, and then there is no difference between them, except that his Master has His supreme rank by His own right and not derived from other creatures, while he is elevated to his rank by the mediation of the creatures.³⁸

This is a fine example of an expression that can refer to an experience of *unio mystica*. Let me adduce now another passage on *devequt*. In the 1280s, probably under the influence of Abulafian thought, R. Joseph Gikatilla formulated a view that is important for the subsequent development of the ideal of *devequt* in Polish

Hasidism: “the letters of the Tetragrammaton, blessed be He, are all of them intellectual, not sensuous letters, and they point to an existence and to a lasting entity, and to every entity in the world, and this is the secret meaning of ‘and thou who cleave to the Lord, your God, shall be alive today’ [Deuteronomy 4:4], namely that those who cleave to the letters of the Tetragrammaton exist and last forever.”³⁹

Abulafia also assumes that the human intellect can become one entity with the divine mind, an experience that could be designated as mystical union. In my opinion this development in Abulafia’s thought, in comparison with Maimonides’ view, can be explained both by acquaintance with Averroistic views concerning the possibility of union between the human and the cosmic intellect, which had been accepted by his teacher in matters of philosophy, R. Hillel of Verona; and by the mystical experiences Abulafia apparently underwent, which he had understood as pointing to union with God. So, for example, he argues in one of his commentaries on the *Guide of the Perplexed* that the actualization of one’s intellect will transform it into the entity that caused this process, namely the Agent Intellect, and that the two will become “one inseparable entity during the time of that act.”⁴⁰

5. LINGUISTIC AND SALVIFIC PROPHECY

Unlike all the thirteenth-century Kabbalists in Spain, Abulafia explicitly understood the ultimate goal of his Kabbalah as an attainment of the experience of prophecy conceived as ecstasy, and consequently built a whole kabbalistic system to accomplish this. The occurrence of a technique and an experience of ecstasy to be achieved by that technique can be described as an “ecstatic model,” which involves not only a confession regarding an experience that someone has had, but also more detailed instructions about how to achieve a certain ideal. When this model stands at the center of a certain literature, and does not occur as just an interpretive stand or an isolated discussion, we may speak about ecstatic Kabbalah or an ecstatic literature. So, for example, we read that “the purpose that is intended by the ways of Kabbalah is the reception of the prophetic, divine, and intellectual influx from God, blessed be He, by means of the Agent Intellect, and the causing of the descent and the blessing by means of the [divine] name upon the individual and upon the community.”⁴¹ This hypervaluation of the intellect is coupled, as we shall see below, with a simultaneous hypervaluation of speech; language is both a domain of contemplation, higher than nature, and a technique for attaining a mystical experience, which has noetic features. In other words, the overactivation of the intellect and its merging with God are achieved by an overactivation of language, utilized as a component in a mystical technique. The two extremes meet, and both are characteristic of Abulafia’s strong propensity for actualization of some of Maimonides’ earlier spiritual ideals. This view is expressed at the very

beginning of *Sitrei Torah*, where Abulafia characterizes the *Guide* as “concerned with the explanation of homologies and the interpretation of prophetic parables.” His own commentary is intended to deal with “religious wisdom, namely the interpretation of the rationale for the life of the rational soul, and the interpretation of the worship of God through love. Even if the subject of each of them [the two books] is unique in itself, everything goes to the same place.”⁴²

In lieu of Maimonides’ hermeneutical project, which is focused on natural and metaphysical frameworks, Abulafia proposes a spiritual interpretation of the Bible, not only pointing to the true meaning of the Bible, and the proper theology, but also and more eminently issuing a pressing call for an intense spiritual life. The intensification of this spiritual life for Abulafia involves an ecstatic path conceived as inducing prophetic experiences of messianic status:

It is known that the truth of the attainment of reality is the comprehension of the divine name, and by its means he will comprehend the commandments, and they point to the Agent Intellect,⁴³ because the comprehension of the Agent Intellect is similar to a candle, which is a “river”⁴⁴ that goes out of ‘Eden. . . . be careful with the wisdom that emerges from the combination found in the letters [available] to whoever knows how to combine them, because this is the goal of the wisdom of the man who understands the divine name . . . because the comprehension of the Agent Intellect, found within the 22 holy letters, comprises all the positive and negative commandments, and it is the candle that illuminates to every man and is “the river that goes out of ‘Eden to water the Garden” [Genesis 2:10], and it shows that within the 22 letters the comprehension of the name is found, and it is, in its entirety, [emerging] out of the combinations of letters, and you will find truly that out of the combination of letters, the known, the knower, and knowledge [are one] . . . and whoever comprehends the Agent Intellect gains the life of the world to come and belongs to the secret of the angels of the living God.⁴⁵

The river emerging from Eden and watering the Garden is, quite plausibly, the intellectual flow that descends from the Agent Intellect, which is separated from matter and is collected by the human intellect. This process is tantamount to the phenomenon of prophecy, which reflects, following Maimonides, the Aristotelian noetic process of representation of the intellectual by means of the imaginative capacity, and the addition of another Aristotelian view, which assumes the identity between the knower, the known, and knowledge in the moment of intellection. Thus, the Garden is envisioned as the human intellect or person, and Eden as the separated Intellect. The latter is conceived, following medieval Aristotelian

cosmology, as being available always to those who know, who in the system of Abulafia are those who use the technique of combining letters, or the divine names. This technique is conceived as inducing a transformation that changes the human into an angelic being, namely into an intellectual entity.⁴⁶ Here we have the explication of the function of language and divine names as means of attaining union with the Agent Intellect.

The main concern of Abulafian soteriology is less the need to attenuate the pernicious effects of the external exile, as Maimonides’ reconstruction aspires to, and much more the attempt to obliterate the inner exile. In fact the two approaches should be seen not as drastically different but, at least insofar as Abulafia’s views are concerned, as building upon the attainment of Maimonides: the philosopher has provided the framework, a political *Weltbild*, a philosophy of nature and a Neo-Aristotelian metaphysics punctuated by some Platonic stands, and a psychology, which serve as starting points for an intensification of the religious life, which will culminate in a mystical experience. As Abulafia explains in his *Sheva’ Netivot ha-Torah*, this intensification is strongly related to the manipulation of language: “the true essence of prophecy, its cause, is the ‘word’ that reaches the prophet from God by means of the ‘perfect language’ that subsumes the seventy languages.”⁴⁷ The “word” plays the role of the overflow in Maimonides’ definition of prophecy, the perfect language being none other than Maimonides’ Agent Intellect, and this is the case also insofar as the seventy languages are concerned. It is this emphasis upon the importance of language and of linguistic imagery that is unique to Abulafia as an interpreter of Maimonides’ *Guide of the Perplexed*. Some Greek forms of ontology and psychology, reverberating in the Middle Ages, have been translated into linguistic terms. The process of transformation of intellection into language, which took place according to Maimonides at the level of the intrahuman psychology, when the imagination translates abstract concepts into linguistic units, takes place in Abulafia at the very source of the intellectual realm, at least insofar as the Agent Intellect is concerned:

You should know that speech alone is not the intellect, but it is the true faculty of the soul. And in the soul there is no natural faculty that is higher than the soul, because the separate intellect emanates upon it its intellect, just as the sun emanates light upon the eye. Speech is a faculty in the soul similar to the eye in relation to the sun, which generates light upon it. And the light of the eye is the very light of the sun, and not something different from it. Likewise, the intellect of the soul is the very emanation of the Agent Intellect, not something different from it. And speech, as conceptualized⁴⁸ in the intellect, and the imaginative faculty and the appetitive faculty and the

sensitive, are ruled by it . . . the intellect commands speech, and speech commands the appetitive [faculty], and the appetitive the imagination, and the imagination the senses, and the senses move in order to fulfill the command of the intellect.⁴⁹

Speech is introduced here as a spiritual faculty, not only as a reproduction of intellectual matters on a corporeal key. Let me turn now to the salvific aspects of the mystical experience. According to Abulafia in *Sefer ha-'Ot*: "The Holy God awakens [heqitz] the hearts of the sleepers and revives the dead by instilling a new spirit in them, so that they will be resurrected. And whoever will not awaken from his sleep and who will not be awakened by his [higher] soul, he will sleep an eternal sleep and will not come to life."⁵⁰ Redemption is therefore not only the arrival of the time of the end but also, and perhaps even more eminently, the arousal of the soul of man to a spiritual life. This mystical arousal is described here as conditioned by the advent of the end of time, but it affects the spirit rather than the body of man. In a rather calculated manner, Abulafia uses expressions related to the resurrection of the dead, namely the resurrection of the bodies, which is interpreted allegorically as pointing to the arousal of the soul. Let me adduce here a statement from an anonymous kabbalistic writing authored either by Abulafia or by one of his disciples, which reflects this extreme emphasis on spiritualization: "This points to the knowledge of the end [qetz] and the end [qetz] of knowledge, namely to the telos of man, because he is created in the image of God."⁵¹ The end is a matter not of the corporeal existence or revival postmortem, but solely of the life of the intellect.

A similar stand is hinted at in *'Otzar 'Eden Ganuz*, where Abulafia states that "the end of the spirit is spirit," namely that the telos of the spirit of man is the spirit of God.⁵² The knowledge of the end is understood as the telos of human knowledge, or of the spirit of man, which is either an imitation of God, as man was created in His image, or stems from God, as is the case of the human spirit. Again, the term *qetz* has been understood allegorically as the telos, which points to the spiritual vision of man, conceived of, implicitly, as more important than the knowledge of the end, namely apocalyptic knowledge.

Abulafia's view of prophecy as the outcome of using mystical techniques had an influence on early Hasidism. In his eclectic commentary on the Pentateuch, *'Or ha-Ganuz le-Tzaddiqim*, R. Aharon ha-Kohen Perlov of Apt, an important Hasidic author, wrote at the end of the eighteenth century:

The issue of prophecy is [as follows]: it is impossible, by and large, to prophesy suddenly, without a certain preparation and holiness; but if the person who wants to prepare himself for [the state of] prophecy sanctifies and purifies himself and concentrates mentally and utterly separates himself from the

delights of this world, and serves the sages, [including] his rabbi, the prophet—and the disciples who follow the way of prophecy⁵³ are called the sons of the prophets—and when his rabbi, [who is] the prophet, understands that this disciple is already prepared for [the state of] prophecy, then his rabbi gives him the topic of the recitations of the holy names, which are keys to the supernal gate.⁵⁴

The terminological and conceptual correspondences between Abulafia's thought and this text are remarkable; prophecy is an experience that can be achieved in the present time, by specific techniques taught by a master, who is described as a prophet, to his disciple. The most important element of the technique, besides the cathartic preparations, is the pronunciation of divine names. The topic of prophecy recurs in *'Or ha-Ganuz le-Tzaddiqim* several times, where the degree of prophecy is described as the divestment of corporeality.⁵⁵ The divine spirit too is described as a level that can be reached in the present time, as is evident in the same author's *Sefer Keter Nehora*. The affinities between the Hasidic master and Abulafia's mystical ideals are significant, pointing to the relevance of the latter's Kabbalah late in the eighteenth century.

ABRAHAM ABULAFIA'S HERMENEUTICS

1. A HERMENEUTICAL GENERATION

One of Abulafia's most original contributions to Jewish mysticism was his innovative and complex hermeneutical system. In Spain his contemporaries were greatly interested in establishing the details of exegetical techniques for decoding the Bible, and it was during this time that the fourfold scheme known as *Pardes* emerged. Whereas in the Song of Songs *pardes* means "orchard," here it was used as an acronym to refer to four senses of the Hebrew Bible: *Peshat* (plain sense), *Remez* (allegorical sense), *Derash* (homiletic sense), and *Sod* (secret sense).¹ This hermeneutical system, unlike Abulafia's more complex one, became widespread in Kabbalah. But different though the Spanish Kabbalists' symbolic techniques

were from Abulafia's, their originators have something in common: being much less concerned with halakhic matters than Nahmanides and most of his followers were, they belong to what I propose calling innovative Kabbalah, with an approach that was open to developments rather than concerned with preserving ancient traditions. In exploring exegetical techniques, all these kabbalistic authors active between 1270 and 1295 concerned themselves with questions related to both the infinity of the sacred text and the status of the interpreter.

Abulafia did not share the religious outlook of the theosophical-theurgical Kabbalists and was not concerned with a symbolic approach. He turned to a much more linguistically oriented exegesis, deconstructing the biblical text as part of an attempt to encounter the divine. He developed and articulated a sevenfold exegetical technique that combined the more classical Jewish methods of interpretation, philosophical allegory, and a variety of deconstructive devices. Since I have fully described this sevenfold scheme elsewhere, I shall briefly survey here only the more "advanced" exegetical techniques against their proper background in early Jewish mystical literature.²

2. INTERPRETIVE ALLEGORY AND THE "PATH OF THE NAMES"

In the writings of Abraham Abulafia and some of his followers, a famous passage from Nahmanides' introduction to his *Commentary on the Pentateuch*, about the biblical text as a continuum of divine names, is quoted several times, always in positive terms. Nahmanides differentiated between this continuum of names, as a more sublime though lost path, and the path of the commandments, namely the biblical text as available today. Abulafia, however, attempted to convert this principle into a practical approach to the biblical text. So, for example, he conceived the divine name of forty-two letters as derived from the first forty-two letters of Genesis,³ advancing this "fact" as part of the view that "the entire Torah consists of divine names of the Holy One, blessed be He, and this is an intelligible proof for a Kabbalist."⁴ Although Abulafia does not explicitly mention Nahmanides' principle here, his formulation is identical with that of the Geronese Kabbalist. However, whereas Nahmanides makes no claim that the way in which he describes the division of the words of the first verse is indeed the original reading according to the "path of the names," but restricts himself to saying that it is no more than a guess, Abulafia regards the name of forty-two as already existing in magical and mystical texts as a divine name. What Nahmanides conceived of as being lost, at least in part, Abulafia claimed to have retrieved.

Although Nahmanides was acquainted with techniques involving allegorical interpretation, he was reticent about applying them;⁵ in general his approach was different from Maimonides' naturalistic exegesis. Abulafia combined Maimonidean

allegorical exegesis with the Nahmanidean theory, namely the allegorical path with the path of the names. It is clear that he was also acquainted with exegetical elements independent of these two thinkers, such as those found in Abraham ibn Ezra's *Commentary on the Pentateuch*, where some allegories are found; the anonymous book of magic *Shimmushei Torah*, written in the Middle Ages; and Hasidei Ashkenaz views, in which divine names played an important role in both thought and magical praxis.⁶ Nevertheless, it is obvious from Abulafia's specific formulations that Maimonides and Nahmanides formed the cornerstones of his approach to the "secrets of the Torah."⁷ In a passage from his *Commentary on the Pentateuch* he conjoins their approaches to produce a hierarchy:

This knowledge should be taken by the righteous from the Torah according to its plain sense, in order to perfect his righteousness; but if he wants to become a pious man, he should approach it by means of the path of the philosophical-esoteric one. However, if he desires to prophesy, he must approach it according to the "path of the names," which is the esoteric path, received from the divine intellect. . . . If you want to be righteous alone, it will suffice that you follow the paths of the Torah, on the path of its plain form. If you want to be pious alone, it will suffice that you know the secrets of the Torah in the manner of the men of inquiry, together with being righteous. However, if you want to be a prophet, it will suffice that you follow the path of the prophets, whose path was to combine the letters of the entire Torah and to approach it by the path of the holy names, from its beginning to the end, as it reached us in a true Kabbalah regarding it [the path] that "the entire Torah consists of the names of the Holy One, blessed be He," together with being perfect in the first two paths.⁸

I take the reading of the Torah on its plain sense as standing for Nahmanides' concept of "the path of the commandments," which according to Abulafia fits the rank of the *tzaddiq*. The last path, defined in terms copied from Nahmanides' introduction to his commentary on the Torah, is the highest one, and although Nahmanides restricted it to Moses alone, for Abulafia it applies not only to all the prophets in the past but also to those who strive to become prophets in the present. The second, philosophical path, the esoteric one, is absent in Nahmanides, but very congruent with the perception of Maimonides in the Middle Ages as an esoteric philosopher. What is important in the very last sentence is the cumulative and the integrative nature of the prophetic path: in order to become a prophet, someone must be both an accomplished righteous and a pious man, namely a philosopher. Philosophical understanding of the Torah, achieved by allegory, is not a spiritual stage to be transcended by the aspirants to prophecy, but an

approach to be maintained even when traveling the path of the prophets. As indicated in this passage, philosophical understanding of the Torah culminates in attaining metaphysical knowledge. It represents the Maimonidean moment of the purified understanding of God, which in Abulafia is a condition for union with Him or for receiving a message from Him. Between the regular religious performance of the righteous and mystical moments of prophecy, namely ecstasy, the contemplative ideal, which involves the allegorical understanding of the Bible, was given a secure place.

Abulafia's insertion of interpretive allegory between Nahmanides' conservative path of the commandments and the evasive path of the names is far from a merely mechanical achievement: as we shall see below, the allegorical approach did not always remain a separate technique, but was sometimes combined with the path of the names. However, what seems to be more important is that it illuminated Abulafia's perception of Nahmanides' paths. So, for example, Abulafia's attitude to the meaning of the commandments is significantly different from that of the Geronese master, and much closer to a Maimonidean intellectualist understanding of the role of Jewish ritual. No less interesting is the fact that philosophical esoterism thus influenced the other form of Jewish esoterism: the linguistic one.

As proposed above, for Abulafia allegorical understanding of the Torah precedes prophetic "reading" and is necessary for its attainment. How did the ecstatic Kabbalist understand the relationship between the two exegetical techniques? According to a statement in Abulafia's *Commentary on the Pentateuch*, "when they [the words of a biblical verse] are taken within the philosophical approach, they become related to each other in a general manner, though not in all particulars, whereas according to the methods of Kabbalah not one letter is left without being used."⁹ The move from allegorical to kabbalistic techniques of interpretation involves, according to Abulafia, a gain in textual understanding; allegory, dealing with broad concepts, involves understanding the relationship between the various elements in a biblical pericope in a general way, which implies that some elements of the text remain beyond the scope of the exegetical allegorical approach. According to Abulafia, only kabbalistic exegesis completely exhausts the plenitude of the text, fully taking into account all textual idiosyncrasies: "not one letter is left without being used."

A hyperliteral¹⁰ approach that inspires Abulafia's kabbalistic exegesis. He regards the letters or the names not as authoritative sources for a certain type of religious behavior, like Nahmanides' "path of the commandments," nor as a magical source, as Nahmanides' understanding of the "path of the names" may have been, but rather as a source of experience. Careful examination of the text, its dissection into its constitutive letters, and their rearrangement to generate new

formulas are, at the same time, an extreme dedication to the text and an opportunity for great creative freedom. The constraint of taking everything in the text into consideration, unlike the allegorical approach, may produce paralyzing moments. Indeed, in the approach adopted in ecstatic Kabbalah, all the letters of the interpreted text must be involved in the new interpretation, but the exegete enjoys great freedom to manipulate the text, so that it is quite possible to find more than one way of construing a “kabbalistic interpretation.” In a passage found later in the same commentary, Abulafia writes:

this topic has been expressed in two pericopes, which have been conflated according to the[ir] plain sense, and commented upon according to the way of wisdom [namely philosophy], with few additions of kabbalistic words; it is necessary indeed to return to this [topic] in order to demonstrate all of this topic also according to the path of the names. However, should we approach this path according to what we have received from it, [as dealing with] the forms of the names and the combinations and gematria and *notariqon* [acronym], and those like them from the paths of Kabbalah, we would not be able to write all these topics that we have received by this kabbalistic path related to the knowledge of the names, even if all the heavens were parchments, and all the seas ink, and all the reeds pens, and all the beams fingers, and every moment of our days as long as the years of Methuselah. *A fortiori*, there are [kabbalistic] paths that we have not received, and we do not know anything about them.¹¹

This rather hyperbolic passage expresses the nature of Kabbalah according to this Kabbalist; it consists of innumerable techniques of interpretation, each of them providing a certain comprehensive and detailed interpretation of the text; this is the reason why even in a kabbalistic commentary on the Torah the kabbalistic exegete is able to offer only some few of the infinite kabbalistic interpretations.¹² The Kabbalah based on divine names is therefore not a forgotten or a fragmentary lore, a closed corpus, but an open field, which is actually expanded by any additional effort of a Kabbalist to understand the details of a text.

All the kabbalistic exegetical techniques mentioned in this passage are intratextual; they exploit the literal resources of the text without importing conceptualizations that would create a concatenation between the different words of the text, as allegorical exegesis does. Eccentric and radical as these forms of exegesis may be, they nevertheless rely exclusively on the potential inherent in the linguistic fabric of the text. Whereas the contents found in the allegorical approach can be exhausted, the kabbalistic ones are conceived of as inexhaustible. From this point of view Abulafia’s approach is closer to the midrashic one, not only in its recurrent

use of statements found in rabbinic sources, but also in its emphasis on intratextuality. Whereas the midrashic, the allegorical, and the kabbalistic-symbolic approaches of the other Kabbalists resort to a certain form of textual narrative transposed onto another set of meanings, because they preserve, in general, the grammatical functions of the words that constitute the biblical narrative, in Abulafia’s intratextual approach this effect is far from obvious. Instead there is more reliance on smaller linguistic units, phonemes, detached from external conceptualization, texts, or plots, to reconstruct the text. This innovative reconstruction makes it possible to take into account all the original letters, or their substitutes, as constituents of the fabric of the newly reconstructed text.

So, for example, when dealing with the three angels that revealed themselves to Abraham, Abulafia mentions that their acts are conspicuous from the scriptures, and that the issue of prophecy has been already clarified in Maimonides’ “Guide of the Perplexed and other books of wisdom [namely philosophy] in a manner sufficient for those who want to know them, if they will peruse them carefully. And the men of speculation [namely the philosophers] would apply [all] the names of the forefathers¹³ to the human intellect, and the rest of the names would refer to the powers beneath it, some closer to it and some further away. They would refer everywhere to the Tetragrammaton and other divine names as designations of the Agent Intellect.”¹⁴ The allegoristic interpreters would therefore interpret the proper names, both those of the forefathers and of God, as pointing to various forms of the intellect, both human and cosmic, which is separate from matter. This extratextual interpretation is quite reductive, transforming the particulars into a general terminology derived from Greek philosophy. From this point of view, the allegorist may not be able to give an account of why the intellect, or God, is designated by one biblical term or another. Being part of a universalist approach—after all, the intellects, the human and the cosmic ones as described in philosophical sources, are transliteral and transnational entities—they transcend the peculiar designations found in the scriptural texts.

An even better understanding of the dramas connected to these intellects can be found in the Averroistic treatises on the intellect, which served as sources of inspiration for some of Abulafia’s own psychological allegories. The biblical text is understood as drawing its allegorical sense not only from another series of texts, the philosophical ones, but also from texts originally written in another language, in many cases stemming from another culture, and oriented to a much more unified and simplistic axiology. However, what seems to be even more striking in the allegorical approach as described above is the absence of God: His names were allegorized as standing for the Agent Intellect, and the whole spiritual enterprise took the form of an intraintellectual affair, involving the relations

between the human and the separate intellects. In some cases it is quite difficult to distinguish between the human and the separate intellects, and sometimes even between them and God, given the assumption that the realm of the spiritual is continuous. This view, adopted by Abulafia in some discussions, offers a restricted domain of intellectual events as recurring in the variety of biblical stories.

This extreme psychologization is “remedied” by the tremendous emphasis on divine names found in the “path of the names.” Although the allegorist speaks about very important and positive psychological events, he nevertheless deals with a “lower God,” a fact that is transcended by the imposition of the kabbalistic discourse. In other words, ecstatic Kabbalah’s adoption of interpretive allegory perceived itself not as an alternative to the negative approach of the Jewish allegorists, but as a higher form of interpretation that forcefully reintroduced the divine into the spiritual enterprise designated by the Kabbalist as prophecy. In the same context Abulafia offers an example of allegorical interpretation that corroborates his argument:

the men of speculation have determined that the name “Lot” is an allegory for the material intellect and that his two daughters and wife refer to the material realm. And we are instructed that the angels are the advisors of the intellect. They are the straight paths that advise the intellect to be saved from the evil ones, which refer to the limbs [of the body], whose end is to be consumed in sulfur and heavenly fire—this is the full extent of the parable. This is in accord with what they say, that the Torah would not have deemed it important to relate such a matter, even in the event that it actually did occur, for what is the point of such a story for the man of speculation?¹⁵

The gist of the allegorical approach is to construe a parable, which represents naturalistic events, in order to retrieve the significance of the biblical story. By using an axiology based upon the psychomachia, the inner war, or the great jihad according to the Sufi texts, the allegorist exegete is able to “save” the “embarrassing” canonical text from the semimythological story, and to confer upon it an aura of philosophical significance. Allegory saves the text from its archaic, plain sense by assuming that another meaning should be imposed, which stems from a type of nomenclature alien to the original text. This extratextuality, unlike the midrashic intertextuality, decodes the canonical text by substituting for the archaic or antiquated meaning another one that often violates the original meaning. Abulafia expresses his uneasiness with the plain sense rather convincingly by presenting a typology of the attitude to language among philosophers: “It is conceivable in only one of the three ways: either it is construed in its plain sense, or it may be a parable, or it occurred to Abraham in a dream in the manner of prophecy.”¹⁶

The alternatives opened by the philosophical approach are different, but the conclusion is the same: either the plain sense is preserved, but then the philosopher has nothing to learn from such an obsolete story; or it did not happen in the historical sense, and the canonical text is to be explored for deeper meanings. This is done either by allegorical interpretation, in the manner we have already seen above, by transforming the text into a veiled philosophical discourse, which should be decoded, or by relegating the story to the realm of prophecy or prophetic dreams. In any case, the Bible on its plain sense is philosophically insignificant. Let me elaborate more on the last possibility: “And if it is a prophetic dream, or a prophecy itself, it is worthy of being written in order to instruct the prophets in the methods of prophecy, and what may be derived from them regarding divine conduct, and in any case the prophet will be able to see in it parables and enigmas.”¹⁷

The last approach, paralleling the path of the names, may provide an insight into how to reach a prophetic experience, or to know God. Indeed Abulafia asserts that “the explanation of the Kabbalist is that they are all names and therefore worthy of being recorded.”¹⁸ He is not worried by the obsolete meaning, nor does he solve the problem by renewing the meaning through substitution. The text is “elevated” to the highest status, that of becoming a continuum of divine names. The ecstatic Kabbalist makes quite different claims from those of the allegorist. Abulafia’s approach deals with the last three paths out of seven, and all three may be characterized as intratextual. As he explains in the *Commentary on the Pentateuch*,

Indeed, every Kabbalist will invoke the Name in all places it occurs, as instructed by means of any of the Divine Attribute, because this is true and right; and this is the reason why it is necessary to inquire into names and to know of each and every one of them to what Attribute it points, because the attributes change in accordance with each and every topic. And it is known that God does not possess at all attributes that will change from one to another, but that the attributes change in accordance with the nature¹⁹ of the creatures that are necessarily emanated from them.²⁰

Whereas the philosophically oriented allegorist will reduce all the plethora of divine names or proper names to describe one entity understood in its different states, namely the intellect, the ecstatic Kabbalist claims that different names correspond to the variety of creatures here below that is emanated from God. On high, there are no attributes that change—a critical hit at some forms of theosophical Kabbalah—but the different modes of action are projected upon the divine realm, extrapolating from the differences in the nature of the creatures. From this vantage point the variety of names is not a case of redundancy, and

should not be reduced to the status of synonyms, but respected in their singularity, in order to discover a higher complexity on high. In any case, what is crucial in this last quotation is the express need to respect the textual multiplicity of names, much more than the allegorist was capable of doing it. It is the concern with the particulars that inspires, at least in principle, the ethos of the “path of the names.” The absoluteness of the details of the text, much more than of its meaning, inspires the linguistically centered kabbalistic approach, which is to be contrasted even to kabbalistic exegesis focused on symbolic interpretations of the morphemes. This concern with intratextuality differs therefore not only from allegoristic extratextuality, but also from the midrashic and, very often, the kabbalistic-symbolist penchants for intertextuality.

3. ALLEGORICAL COMPOSITIONS AND DIVINE NAMES

Another important use of allegory is the allegorical composition. Unlike the few instances discussed above, and many others found in Jewish philosophy and some kabbalistic books, where the interpreted texts were not composed by authors who envisioned their writings as fraught with allegorical meanings and the interpretive allegory is, in fact, an imposed allegorization, few Jewish treatises were intended as allegories from the very beginning.

In the same years when the *Zohar* was being composed in Spain as a symbolic text, Abraham Abulafia produced in Italy and Sicily a series of what he called prophetic writings describing his revelations and interpreting them allegorically. In my opinion, the allegorical interpretations are only later and insignificant additions to a text that initially had a literary and conceptual structure and represent explications of the conceptual elements already coded within the text. Unfortunately, fuller analysis of the literary and hermeneutical aspects of Abulafia’s activity in this realm remains a desideratum, since most of Abulafia’s “prophetic” books have disappeared, and only his commentaries survive; the single original prophetic text extant, a poetically oriented treatise named *Sefer ha-’Ot*, is not accompanied by a commentary. Nevertheless, it is still possible to investigate the allegorical composition and the author’s interpretation because some quotations from the original prophecies precede the discussions in the commentaries.

In an important passage from a lost prophetic writing titled *Sefer ha-Melitz*, the Agent Intellect, the human intellect, and the persona of the historical messiah are all described as the messiah: “the term *Mashiyyah* is equivocal, [designating] three [different] matters; first and foremost the truly Agent Intellect is called the *Mashiyyah* . . . and the man who will forcibly bring us out of the exile from under the rule of the nations due to his contact with the Agent Intellect—he will [also] be

called *Mashiyyah*. And the material human hylic intellect is called *Mashiyyah*, and is the redeemer and has influence over the soul and over all elevated spiritual powers.”²¹ While the historical person parallels the path of the righteous and the human intellect the path of the philosophers, the Agent Intellect may stand, as it does for Maimonides and Abulafia in many cases, for the source of prophecy, and thus the path of prophecy. The development of the intellect—or the souls—in this passage is understood in soteriological terms, implying a messianic, namely redemptive, experience attained by means of the combination of letters and recitations of divine names.

Let me turn to another instance of allegorical interpretation of a fragment of a revelation found in a commentary on a prophetic book:

And his saying “and his name I have called Shadday, like My name,” [means] whose secret is Shadday like My name, and [you should] understand all the intention. Likewise his saying “He is I and I am He,” and it cannot be revealed more explicitly than this. But the secret of the “corporeal name” is the “messiah of God.” Also “Moses will rejoice,” which he has made known to us, and which is the five urges, and I called the corporeal name as well . . . now Raziel started to contemplate the essence of the messiah, and he found it and recognized it and its power, and designated it David son of David, whose secret is Yimelokh: . . . the heart of the prophet.²²

This nexus between the body of the messiah, his intellect, and the source of intellection is accompanied by a string of gematria’ot: ha-shem ha-gashmi (the material or corporeal name) = *Mashiyyah ha-Shem* (the anointed of the name) = yismah Moshe (Moshe will rejoice) = hamishah yetzirim (five urges) = 703. The first three phrases contain the three consonants H, Sh, M, as in either ha-shem or MoSheH. The meaning of this occurrence is quite explicit in a passage of Abulafia in his *Commentary on Sefer ha-’Edut*: “MoSheH knew God [ha-Shem] by means of the name [shem], and God [ha-Shem] also knew MoSheH by means of the name [of Moses].”²³

In other words, by means of the recitation of the divine name Moshe knew God, and God knew him, or, in the terms of the quotation, by means of the name, Moses became the anointed of God. The words ha-shem ha-gashmi stand for the name of Moses and the names of the forefathers that have become, by means of a complex linguistic transformation, divine names.²⁴ However, the main gist of the passage is that in speaking about Moses and his transformation into the messiah, namely his cleaving to God, Abulafia includes also the forefathers’ names, and by doing so he includes the name of Abraham. If we remember that we have been quoting from a prophetic book addressed to Abraham, hinted at by the angelico-theophoric name Raziel—both names amount by gematria to 248—there can be no doubt

that the messiah hinted at here is no other than Abraham Abulafia, who claimed to be a messiah. This is also implied in another series: *David ben David = Yimlokh²⁵ = lev ha-navi'* (the heart of the prophet) = 100 means that the entity named *David ben David* will reign. Some few lines earlier in the *Commentary on Sefer ha-'Edut*, God has mentioned the anointment of Abulafia as a king. Abulafia sees himself as David, the son of David. I assume that the second David is no other than the Agent Intellect, and the term "David, the son of David" stands for the union between the human and the separate intellects. This reading may be corroborated by a third expression, *ve-'Anokhi Hu'*, namely "and I am He," which amounts to 99, a figure that for the Kabbalists is practically identical with 100.

Thus, Abulafia's discussion is not just an allegorical composition attempting to deal with the way in which someone may become a messiah, by reciting divine names; it should also be understood as revealing, on a more esoteric level, not only the atemporal "truth" about the spiritual path, understood in soteriological terms, but also the very temporal path, and perhaps an issue as important for Abulafia as the atemporal issue, namely that he himself is a messiah and a prophet. Allegory here is a compositional technique, an interpretive device, but also, and more eminently, an esoteric way of pointing to one's own extraordinary mystical attainment and his redemptive role in history. Abulafia hints at the mystical attainment in the phrase dictated to him by God: "He is I and I am He," which should be understood as pointing to a mystical union between the human and the divine.²⁶ Allegory may therefore play a more general role as telling the story of all the souls striving for spiritual redemption and extreme mystical attainments, as indeed it does in many of Abulafia's writings. However, in some of his discussions allegory also stands in a more esoteric way for his own soul.

Spiritual allegory, which is a term that seems to me more appropriate both for decoding the biblical text and for composing his narrative, may designate a special application of allegorical techniques for self-expression rather than for more general exegesis and literary composition dealing with atemporal truths. What is important in this instance of spiritual allegory, however, is that the mystical path and the mystical attainment are not expressed solely by intellectualist terminology drawn from the medieval philosophical patrimony, but also by linguistic devices, personal and divine names, that are intertwined with more classical forms of allegory.

4. NATURAL/DIVINE LANGUAGE

The eccentric forms of hermeneutics adopted and developed by Abulafia are part of a larger process that I propose calling the arcanization of Judaism, which received an important impetus in the thirteenth century. Within the framework of

this arcanization, not only the words of the scriptures were conceived of as sacred and powerful but also their constituent elements, the Hebrew letters. Language became arcane, and so, too, did all its components. In the sustained contest between the view of language as conventional and the view of language as natural, the huge majority of Kabbalists, including all the ecstatic Kabbalists, adopted the view that language was natural, and even divine, sometimes because it was conceived of as being revealed. So, for example, R. Nathan Harar, who wrote the book *Sha'arei Tzedeq* toward the end of the thirteenth century in Messina, asserted:

Anyone who believes in the creation of the world, [if he also] believes that languages are conventional, [then] he must also believe that they [the linguistic conventions] are of two types: the first is divine, that is, an agreement between God and Adam; and the second is natural, that is, based on agreement between Adam, Eve, and their children. The second is derived from the first, and the first was known only to Adam and was not passed on to any of his offspring except Seth, whom he sired in his image and likeness. And so, the [esoteric] tradition [ha-Qabbalah] reached Noah. And the confusion of the tongues during the generation of the dispersion [at the tower of Babel] occurred only [with regard] to the second type of language, that is, the natural language. So eventually the [esoteric] tradition [ha-Qabbalah] reached 'Eber and, later, Abraham the Hebrew. Thus we find regarding *Sefer Yetzirah*, whose authorship is attributed to Abraham, that the Almighty revealed Himself to him. And from Abraham the [esoteric] tradition was passed on to Isaac and then to Jacob and to his sons [the tribal ancestors]. And our forefathers were in Egypt, but the Kabbalah was in the possession of the elders of the nation, and the thing remained with them until the birth of Moses, and he [Moses] was raised in the house of the king, and he learned many sorts of alien [namely philosophical and scientific] lores, and despite this fact, because of his predisposition to receive, his mind did not rest before his father, Amram, gave to him the Kabbalah that was with them from the forefathers, blessed be their memory. And when it happened that he went out in the field and secluded himself in the desert, the "Lord of All" revealed Himself to him in the bush and informed him and taught him and related to him the most wondrous things, which remained with him until the [revelatory] event at Sinai, when He introduced him to the inmost secrets of the science of the letters . . . until he became acquainted with the essence of these letters, revealed to us from his cognition, and the essence of their distant roots, and Moses, blessed be his memory, had arranged the Torah as a continuum of letters, which corresponds to the path of the [divine] names,

which reflects the structure of the letters on high; and [then] he divided the text [of the Torah] in accordance with the reading of the commandments, which reflects the essence of the structure of the lower entities.²⁷

This passage, which though written by his student reflects Abulafia's own view quite accurately, assumes that the essence of Kabbalah is a tradition dealing with the nature of language and prophetic revelation at the same time. The knowledge connected to this ancient tradition diminished, and in the future, with the arrival of the messiah, it will reemerge.²⁸ The emphasis on both *Sefer Yetzirah* and the role of Abraham may point to an Abulafian source. Both Kabbalists regarded the linguistic material as a reality that was superior to the natural domain and as an easier way to the ecstatic experience than any other medium.²⁹ More than any of the theosophical-theurgical Kabbalists, these two ecstatic Kabbalists contemplated the Hebrew letters of canonical texts and combined them in order to achieve new revelations.

ESCHATOLOGICAL THEMES AND DIVINE NAMES IN ABULAFIA'S KABBALAH

1. REDEMPTION AND THE DIVINE NAME

Redeemers tend to possess confidence in being already redeemed themselves. Redemption of the many is the application of their own redemption, as anticipated by the chosen one. This was the case with Abraham Abulafia. The formulator of a kabbalistic system focused on manipulations of language and divine names believed that redemption consisted in the application of the linguistic techniques on a much broader scale. The new age—historical or psychological—was to be ushered in, according to Abulafia's view of eschatology, by a change of names, both divine and human. The theme of the divine name as pivotal for the changes at the end of time is ubiquitous in Abulafia's writings. Let me adduce some examples for the importance of this theme.

There is no redemption but by means of the name of YHWH
And His redemption is not for those who do not request it;
In accordance with His Name.
This is why I, Zekhariyah,
The destroyer of the building
And the builder of the destruction,
Have written this small book
By the name of² 'Adonay the small³
In order to disclose in it the secret of YHWH the great.⁴

Here the composition of *Sefer ha-'Ot*, probably the most apocalyptic among Abulafia's prophetic books, is expressly envisioned as aiming to disclose the secret of the great divine name. However, until then the name 'Adonay is conceived of as dominant. The author conceives himself as the revealer of the great Tetragrammaton, apparently assumed to have been unknown beforehand. Elsewhere in the same book, the plene writing of the Tetragrammaton is sufficient for those who know how to attain a spiritual life for themselves, because it is the source of eternal life.⁵ The name that Abulafia chooses to call himself throughout the book, Zekhariyah, is a theophoric one, meaning "the one who recites the [divine] name." However, it is not only the new or renewed knowledge of the divine name, and its preponderance over other names, that is characteristic of the messianic age, but also a change of divine attributes that will occur and symbolize this coming age. So, for example, we read in a relatively early book of Abulafia's:

It is known that these two attributes are changed always in accordance with the nature of creation, turning into each other. And the secret is that the attribute of mercy always prevails, because the numerical value of YHVH is 26 and that of the name 'Elohim is 86, namely when someone adds 86 to 26, and when someone writes 26 in its plene form, *kaf vav*, the concealed [name of] 86 under the name of 26 will be found. This means that the attribute of judgment is concealed while that of mercy is revealed. Both are, however, 26, which means that these two attributes are but one attribute.⁶

The Hebrew letters, spelled *K[a]F* and *V[a]V*, can be combined in another way to constitute *KaV*, whose numerical value is 26, namely the gematria of the Tetragrammaton, and *pav*, which is numerically equivalent to 86, the gematria of 'Elohim.⁷ The passage points to the concealment of the attribute of judgment, represented here by the name 'Elohim, which is contained in the plene writing of the letters of the Tetragrammaton. Thus, the revelation of the divine name of four letters conveys the preponderance of the attribute of mercy over that of judgment.

Indeed, it seems to me that Abulafia conceives of the belief in the Tetragrammaton as characteristic of messianic times. In the *Commentary on Sefer ha-'Edut* he confesses that he has received three revelations, the first of which he calls "belief in 'Elohim"; then a revelation enigmatically described as 'Emunah 'Ahat, "one belief"; and finally "true belief," namely "belief in the special name," 'Emunah be-shem ha-meyuhad, which is conceived of as "a hidden secret" that is counted in the "secret of redemption."⁸

The mention of the first belief—in the name 'Elohim—and the last—in the Tetragrammaton—is clear evidence that there is a progression between the two. The importance that Abulafia attributes to beliefs is remarkably consonant with the Christian emphasis on faith in general and, much later, forms of devotion to the name of Jesus in particular.⁹ Perhaps this consonance offered Abulafia some reason to presume that he would find a receptive ear by Pope Nicholas III. This pope was a patron of the Franciscan sect known as the Minorites, and was no doubt aware of the adoration that St. Francis felt for the name of Jesus, an adoration that in the course of time, and already during the lifetime of Abulafia, had become an important theological phenomenon.¹⁰ Did Abulafia know about this new element of Italian Franciscan theology? It is difficult to answer this question. Yet this is precisely the framework within which it is possible to explain Abulafia's activity among the Christians of Sicily during the ninth decade of the thirteenth century.

This focusing upon the importance of the divine name in an eschatological context may also shed some light on a further development of kabbalistic messianism, as represented by Sabbateanism; Sabbatai Tzevi started his strange deeds with the pronunciation of the divine name.¹¹ Change of the name is, however, not only a matter of the reorientation of belief, which is indeed the gist of Abulafia's view, but also of a more ontological restructuring. In another book Abulafia asserts:

The end of the change [hilluf] of the times has arrived, and so has the end of the order of the stars, in accordance with the attributes. And the attributes and names will change, and the languages will be mixed [yevelbelu], and the nations and the beliefs will be reshaped, and the diadem of the Israelite [nation] will return to its former state, and the rank of Jews will be related to the name of the essence [of God], not to the name of [His] attribute. [Then] the revealed will become concealed, and the concealed will become revealed, and the rank of gentiles—men and women—will be lowered, and they will be vanquished, and the rank of Jews—men and women—will ascend and rise.¹²

Though expressed in rather apocalyptic terms, the changes announced in this passage may be much less external than internal; the main topic is a cultural-religious upheaval: the Jews will relate now to the essential divine name rather

than to the name that is an attribute. This is quite a crucial issue, as we have already seen in the quotation from *Sefer ha-'Ot* earlier in this chapter, but its significance may be even deeper when the quotation just above is compared to the earlier ones. Abulafia here uses the verb *gevulbelu*—translated here as “mixed”—to describe a deep change in the languages. In my opinion, it should be understood as pointing to the undoing of the diversity of languages launched at the tower of Babel. This is an “objective” event, as is the disappearance of other opinions, beliefs, and nations. This “conversion” should be seen as a form of retrieval of a simpler, or primordial, form of language and religion, when the messianic time arrives.¹³ The term *hilluf*, translated here as “change,” stands for a change that took place in the past and will be obliterated in the messianic time: “the end of change.” Thus Abulafia assumes that there is a certain correspondence between the divine names, the divine attributes, the constellations of the stars, and affairs here below: languages, nations, beliefs. A change of the divine names, namely the emergence or the reemergence of the Tetragrammaton as dominant in history, means a new type of relationship between the divine attributes and, as a result, the different structuring of the celestial constellations, as well as the return of the people of Israel to their lost grandeur.¹⁴ In Abulafia’s rhetoric of his vision of messianism, there is an important restorative moment.

Abulafia tells us in *Sefer ha-'Ot* that after he failed to disseminate his teachings among the Jews he turned to the Christians.¹⁵ After the Christians also rejected his teachings, he wrote: “Now you of wise heart seek the Lord in your hearts, day and night. Investigate His Truth and cleave to Him and remember His Name. For His Name is engraved within the memory, and the Spirit of the Lord speaks, and within Her is recognized eternal salvation.”¹⁶ These words inform us that the path that Abulafia advocated in vain to the Christians was the contemplation of the divine name. Last but not least in this context, Abulafia’s disciple R. Nathan ben Sa’adyah Harar, the author of *Sefer Sha’arei Tzedeq*, claims that

during the time of the Exile, the activity of the names was obliterated,¹⁷ and prophecy was canceled from Israel, because of hindrance of the attribute of judgment. This state will go on until the coming of the person whom God has chosen, and his power will be great because of what has been transmitted to him related to their power,¹⁸ and God will reveal the name to him, and transmit to him the supernal keys. Then he will stand against the attribute of judgment . . . and the attribute of mercy will guide him. The supernal [entity] will become lower, and the lower will become supernal,¹⁹ and the Tetragrammaton, which has been concealed, will be revealed, and ‘Adonay, which was revealed,²⁰ will [then] be concealed. Then it will happen to us

what has been written: “For they shall all know me from the least of them to the greatest of them” [Jeremiah 31:33]. Then the natural, philosophical sciences will be canceled and concealed, because their supernal power was canceled, but the science of names and letters, which are by now unknown to us, will be revealed, because their [supernal] power is gradually increasing. Then “the Jews will have light and gladness” [Esther 8:16], and sadness and worry will be [the part of] the deniers, and “many of the people of the land will become Jews” [Esther 8:17], and “your sons and daughter will prophesy” [Joel 3:1].²¹

Changes in the effectiveness of divine names are related to redemptive events. However, just as in the case of the earlier discussions, the influence of a certain divine name or another is conceived of as concerning mainly the different forms of knowledge: either the flourishing of the inferior types of knowledge of alien extraction during the period of exile, or the return of prophecy in the case of the Tetragrammaton. In other words, although major upheavals are expected with the advent of redemption, they are of a more internal, noetic nature, rather than involving a disruption of the cosmic order. In fact redemption may be summarized as the revelation of ecstatic Kabbalah, a mystical lore based on letters and names. Moreover, according to Abulafia, the letters ‘aHWY constitute the hidden divine name, which will be revealed to the messiah.²² Thus, the return of prophecy is reported in a statement that also implies the revelation of an unknown divine name.²³

2. CHANGES OF NAMES OF THE MYSTICS

In addition to the revelation of the hidden name of God, Abulafia mentions the change of the name of the mystic during the mystical experience, an event that also conveys messianic overtones. For example, we learn that during such an experience “it will appear to him as if his entire body, from head to foot, has been anointed with the oil of anointing, and he was ‘the anointed of the Lord [Mashiyyah YHWH]’ and His emissary, and he will be called ‘the angel of the Lord’; his name will be similar to that of his Master, which is Shadday, who is called Metatron, the prince [namely the angel] of the divine Face.”²⁴ Thus, just as Enoch received divine names as part of his apotheosis as Metatron, the human mystic in the present will also assume new names, in many cases having a theophoric structure. In a prophetic book composed in the same years as the passage above, Abulafia writes:

And the meaning of his saying “Rise and lift up the head of my anointed one [meshiyhi]” refers to the life of the souls. “And on the New Year and in the Temple”—it is the power of the souls. And he says: “Anoint him as a king”—rejoice him like a king with the power of all the names. “For I have anointed

him as a king over Israel”²⁵—over the communities [of] Israel, that is, the commandments. And his saying “and his name I have called Shadday, like My Name”²⁶—whose secret is Shadday like My Name, and understand all the intention. Likewise his saying “He is I and I am He,” and it cannot be revealed more explicitly than this. But the secret of the “corporeal name” is the “Messiah of God.” Also “Moses will rejoice,” which he has made known to us, and which is the five urges, and I called the corporeal name as well. . . . now Raziel started to contemplate the essence of the messiah, and he found it and recognized it and its power and designated it David, the son of David, whose secret is Yimelokh.²⁷

This very rich passage cannot be analyzed here in all its complex details; I shall focus only on the topics relevant to our discussion.²⁸ First and foremost, the revelation is related to Abulafia, apparently during his stay in Rome in 1280, and the temple where the messiah will be installed mentioned here may be no other than St. Peter’s. However, I take these spatial and temporal details to present only one facet of Abulafia’s messianism. As he himself puts it, after describing the details of the revelation, the mythical elements stand for spiritual events. *Rosh meshighi* is equal in gematria to *u-ve-rosh ha-shanah* but also to *hayyei ha-nefashot*, namely the life of the souls. This is a conspicuously spiritualistic interpretation of messianism. The messianic figure, chosen by God, is taught the secrets of the divine name, and, using this knowledge, he is able to start his messianic activity. Redemption is a consequence of the messiah’s use of the divine names, just as the instauration of the messiah is attained by means of the power of the divine names. The revelation of the divine names to a messianic figure is quite a rare topic. So far as I know, an explicit instance of such a revelation is found only in Abulafia’s writings. Thus, for example, we read in his epistle *Ve-Zot Li-Yhudah*: “When I arrived at [the knowledge of] the names by my loosening of the bonds of the seals,²⁹ ‘the Lord of All’³⁰ appeared to me and revealed to me His secret and informed me about the time of the end of the exile and about the time of the beginning of redemption. He compelled me to prophesy.”³¹

The nexus between the revelation of the divine name and messianism is therefore conspicuous in ecstatic Kabbalah; indeed this issue is the core of the whole system.³² Revealing the divine names is, for Abulafia, tantamount to revealing the core of the Kabbalah itself, which is quintessential for knowing the secret of the time of the advent of the messianic era. Indeed, in the same epistle Abulafia uses the same statement from *Sefer Yetzirah* to characterize the form of Kabbalah that he deems the highest, namely prophetic Kabbalah, which aims at teaching how to actualize the Kabbalists’ intellects.³³ It is important to dwell upon the

sequence of the events related by Abulafia: his spiritual life, described here as knowing the names and loosing the bonds, brought him to a subsequent revelation of the eschatological secrets. A spiritual life is conceived here to be a condition of redemption, not vice versa.

However, the revelation of the divine name is only one aspect of the relationship between name and redemption. According to other writings of the ecstatic Kabbalist, the redemptive experience of the messiah is related to his becoming unified with God or the Agent Intellect, a state understood as a deep spiritual transformation, described also as the change of the name of the messiah to a theophoric one. God’s theophany at the end of time, described in terms of changes of both names and attributes, is related to the messiah’s apotheosis as part of his individual transformation. Given that the process of apotheosis is explicitly described as triggered by a technical use of the divine name, we may conceive the topic of the divine name as comprising the mode of theophany, the goal of apotheosis and the technique to reach it. Or, to express it in other terms: the revelation of the divine names, which is identical with the future reign of the attribute of mercy, is an objective event, namely a theophany, which is to be accompanied by personal redemptions and apotheoses, which consist in a transformation of individuals into spiritual beings, designated by the theophoric names, by means of reciting letters of the divine name. This median role of the knowledge of the divine name is well expressed in *’Otzar ‘Eden Ganuz*, where Abulafia writes: “The knowledge of the names is a supreme degree over all the human degrees, shared with the divine degrees, namely that they announce the way that unifies the soul to the Agent Intellect, in an eternal union, and there is no other way close to it, that may bring the soul to this wondrous degree.”³⁴

Divine names are conceived of as modes of divine theophanies, techniques for reaching apotheotic states, and designations for those who have reached them. Earlier in the same book Abulafia writes, in a way that is not quite clear to me, about the passage of the name of man from *potentia* to *actu*, which causes the ascent of the man by two degrees.³⁵ By such an experience someone is able to both transcend and control nature. Elsewhere in the same treatise we learn that “the powers³⁶ of the Special Name³⁷ are the tools of the Messiah³⁸ to change the natures by their means, because its [the name’s] powers are above Man, Lion, Ox, and Eagle. And know that *’eHeYeH* is the Special Name, and this is why it comprises all the living beasts, just as the vowels of the name are tantamount to *Ratzu va-Shov*, and I shall give you a sign that all the Chariot is beneath the hands of Man.”³⁹

The name *’eHeYeH* is an important one, and it is worth observing that it is reminiscent of Moses’ mission to disclose that new name to the people of Israel. This

changing of nature is in line with some philosophical views in the Middle Ages, according to which the accomplished man, able to purify his soul and cleave to the cosmic soul, or the Agent Intellect, is capable of influencing the processes taking place in nature. Abulafia claims that at the beginning of the millennium according to the Jewish calendar, namely in 1240, when he was born, the messiah will come, and he boasts⁴⁰ about his knowledge of the divine name.⁴¹ Elsewhere he claims: "The messiah confesses that his speech and conversation come from the special name that is with him by nature, and it generates the speech, and actualizes it after it has been in *potentia*. And the simpletons do not perceive from where their speech comes, and they are like an animal that produces a sound that is similar to speech, but does not understand the nature that is inherent in it."⁴²

3. JEWS, JUDAISM, AND DIVINE NAMES

Abulafia's eschatological vision should be understood in a very dynamic manner: it is not identical with the more popular vision of the final redemption of the people of Israel, once and forever; rather, it has a place within an undulatory version of political history, one that sees the ascent and decline of the political organization of the Jewish nations as part of larger political and military trends.⁴³ Thus, although a restoration may include the return of the Jews to their land—a feature of the messianic age often emphasized in many writings on the subject but totally marginalized by Abulafia—his concern is with the spiritual aspects of this restoration. Abulafia embraces in some of his discussions a unique understanding of the essence of Judaism: he understands the significance of the name of *YeHWDaH* as a confession to the power of the divine name. In an untitled ecstatic tract he writes that in the eschatological time, "The comprehension of the Jew will be the comprehension of the Name, and this is the way [the name] Shadday was interpreted, to the effect that for us the name 'HYH [I shall be] suffices, and likewise *YeHWDY* [Jew], *YHW DaY* [the name *YHW* suffices], 'Ehad 'Ah 'Ehad [One the Brother One]; and by the comprehension of *YHWH 'Ehad* [Tetragrammaton is One], redemption [*Ge'ulah*] will come to us."⁴⁴ The word *YeHWDY*, "Jew," contains the consonants that also constitute the locution *YHW DaY*, which means that the three consonants that constitute the Tetragrammaton are sufficient. A comprehension of the essence of the Jew is therefore identical with comprehension of the sufficiency of the divine name. By means of gematria, the consonants of the word *YeHWDY* amount to 35, as do the consonants of the expression 'Ehad 'Ah 'Ehad, "One [is the] Brother [of] One." The two occurrences of 'Ehad amount in gematria to 26, and this addition of "One" to "One" is the significance of the word 'Ah, "Brother." But 26 is also the gematria of the consonants of the Tetragrammaton.⁴⁵ This comprehension is salvific, as we may learn not only from the mention of *Ge'ulah*, "redemption," but

also from perusal of the larger context (not quoted here), where the phrase *Mashiyah YHWH* [Messiah of the divine name] is mentioned. In other words, for Abulafia the eschatological success of the Jews mentioned in the quotation from 'Ozar 'Eden Ganuz may—though I cannot say must—be understood not only as related to a political and religious ascent of a certain nation but also as the emergence of a certain type of comprehension of the centrality of the divine name. Or, to formulate it more drastically: it would not be surprising to assume that Abulafia understood the term "Jew" as a metonym for the perfect knowledge of the divine name.

In this context let me introduce a discussion about exile in Egypt and language: "They exchanged their language for numerous foreign tongues, to the extent that one does not understand the other, [and are] almost like animals that do not understand one another and revert to incapacity for verbal communication."⁴⁶ The disappearance of the use of a common language among the Jews, namely the near oblivion of Hebrew, renders them similar to animals; multiplicity of languages among the Jews, made real in the exile, also entails a reversion to a state of animality. The Jews do not possess any special superiority while in the exilic situation, and I assume, on the basis of the context of this quotation, that they are ruled by the attribute of judgment. We may assume that the reversal of this situation entails the return of the attributes of mercy, of one language, and of redemption.

In another attempt to define the nature of the Jews, Abulafia writes in his Commentary on *Sefer ha-Melitz*: "the meaning of 'a man of Judah' is that in this name is exemplified the lesson of Judaism [*Yahadut*]. We are informed that the aim of consolation is not arrived at merely by speculation, but rather they must make whole the integrity of Judaism, that is, confession [*hoda'ah*] of the knowledge of the truth and departure from confusion."⁴⁷ The author himself explains the meaning of the term *Yahadut* here: it implies *hoda'ah*, namely confession, derived from a stipulated etymological relationship between the words *Yehudah* and *hoda'ah*. The content of the confession is knowledge of the truth.⁴⁸ The nature of this truth is not explained here, but we may discern its meaning from the passage that immediately precedes this sentence:

Behold, Raziel intends to inform us of His Exalted Name in accordance with the hidden path, in order to bring us closer to Him, may His Name be blessed. Separate [the elements of] the words, for at times a name may consist of even only one letter, which is regarded as if it were one whole word. This tells us that each letter is a world unto itself, according to the Kabbalah.⁴⁹ And he was commanded to illustrate this wondrous Divine Power in order to instruct us regarding His blessed Name. Invert the [letters of the] word Raziel, so that it becomes *Yisrael*. This tells us that *Yisrael* is *Yizrael*, just as

Avraham is Ya'aqov. This is due to the joining of their two attributes, grace and truth, as it is written: "Thou will show Truth to Ya'aqov [and] Grace to Avraham" [Micah 7:20]. And in the word *Hodu* [glorify, confess] is indicated the [Divine] Name 'HYH because of the two essence-names composed through the name YH, which are YHW and YHWH, signifying HWD, HWDW, and YWDW [they will glorify] as well as [the words] *ViDWY* [confession], HWDW [glorify] and HWD [glory], [and] WHDY YV WDH [I will glorify], YHY, YWDH. Indeed the confession of the Name is the [true] glorification. Thus HWDW [glorify] in the Name of 'HYH is the HWDAH *VaD'aY* [confession of certainty], and the hidden form [of the Name is] HWDAH. This is sufficient, just as He is sufficient, may His Name be exalted and raised high.⁵⁰

It is clear that according to Abulafia the *hoda'ah*, confession, which is the essence of Judaism, is the *hoda'ah* in the names of God—YH 'HYH YHWH. We may therefore assume that *Yahadut* does not refer to the "Jewish people" as a whole, but rather to a specific religious experience that involves the names of God. This is also Abulafia's view in his epistle *Matzref la-Kesef*: "And the Jew who thinks that because he is Jewish and can trace his ancestry to the seed of Judah, he is of the seed of royalty, if he does not confess, in truth his similarity with the tribe of Judah is only one of name. For Judah is etymologically related to confession [*hoda'ah*]."⁵¹

Abulafia relies on the etymological allusion to Genesis 49:8: *Yehudah* as deriving from *Yodukhah*. Yet whereas there the confession is made by Judah's brothers to Judah, Abulafia alters the meaning and has it refer to God. This portrayal of Judaism is highly reminiscent of his vision of the Kabbalah, namely that its central goal was the dissemination of the knowledge of the divine name. Similarly, he was the standard-bearer of the view that the messiah would reveal the true divine name and the Kabbalah of the Names. Thus, the "Judaism" about which Abulafia intended to speak to Pope Nicholas III was a religion centered upon the name of God, and not one centered upon the halakhic structure of Judaism. This definition of Abulafia's mission would place it outside the realm of the "messianic nationalism" of Nahmanides⁵² and another contemporary of his, Rabbi Yitzhaq ben Yedayah, and is also different from the proselytizing missionary of Judaism as proposed by some scholars.⁵³ Likewise we read in *Sefer ha-'Ot*, "You, O nation of God, Supernal Holy Ones who look to the Name [mabitei Shemo] and to the source of your intelligence, have seen the form of YHVH within the form of your hearts."⁵⁴ It seems to me that the expression "those who look to His Name" is an explanation of the name *Yisra'el*, indicated by the words "nation of God." This interpretation divides the word *Yisra'el* into *yishar*, etymologically related to the word *yashur*, "will look to," and the word 'el, "God."⁵⁵

Therefore, when describing the messiah as involved in a confrontation with the pope and prevailing by means of the divine name, as described in chapter 3, we have an application of a mystical concept of the change of nature by means of the divine name. However, whereas philosophers under the influence of Avicenna would offer a totally naturalistic explanation for those changes, namely the union of the human spiritual faculty to the spiritual power that directs events in the lower world, Abulafia introduces three additional elements: the messiah, the divine name, and the will of God.

Moreover, he implicitly regards the messianic achievement as uniting the three main religious elements in Judaism: the Torah, the Chariot, and the divine name. I assume that the Chariot, *Merkavah*, has something to do with the combination of the letters of the divine names. *Ma'aseh Merkavah* is numerically equivalent with *Shem ba-shem*,⁵⁶ while the Torah, as mentioned above, points to vocalization of the consonants. According to another text, there is a deep affinity between the Torah and *Merkavah*. In one of his commentaries on the *Guide of the Perplexed* Abulafia advances another interesting gematria: *Ma'aseh Merkavah* is tantamount to *Galgal ha-Torah* (= 682), namely the sphere or circle of the Torah, which is to be understood as the combinatory circles that are related to permuting the letters of the Torah.⁵⁷ The Divine Chariot, understood as a complex of divine names, is the blueprint of the entire Torah, which Kabbalists conceived of as containing an esoteric level that emerged from reading it as a continuum of divine names. Perhaps control or the rule over the Chariot has to do with control over the circles of divine names that are related to the Torah. Thus the knowledge of the divine name comprises both Torah and *Merkavah* and is the essence of the Jew.

Last but not least: the knowledge of the divine names will be used by the messiah in a more magical manner. In the untitled treatise mentioned above, Abulafia wrote: "and then will be the true time of the Torah, when the Messiah of YHWH will control all the Chariot, so that he will change the natures by⁵⁸ the will of God, and to him it was said: 'Time, two times and a half' [Daniel 12:7]."⁵⁹ The focus of the discussion is overtly messianic: not only is the messiah mentioned but also the verse from Daniel dealing with the date of redemption. However, redemption is conceived to consist not only in a noetic or religious state of mind, but also in the capacity to change the natures, *le-shannot ha-teva'im*.

Let me attempt to describe the meaning of such a changing of natures. The recognition of the divine name and of the divine unity is to be complemented by an additional type of knowledge, that of the vowels between the consonants of the divine names; the vowels are conceived of as a hidden topic, hinted at by the vocalization of the consonants of the Torah. By using the letters of the divine name with

a certain vocalization, namely *Holam* and *Qamatz*, which are the vowels of *Torah*, the true *Torah* is achieved, namely a mystical experience.

In other words, Abulafia's Kabbalah consists essentially in understanding, manipulating, permuting, and experiencing encounters related to the divine names. These acts represent an intense, vibrant, and very focused type of mysticism, which assumes that an experience of plenitude, understood as salvific, is inherent in the very essence of the letters of the divine name.

ABRAHAM ABULAFIA AND ECSTATIC KABBALAH

1. On this important Jewish Kabbalist see Scholem, *Major Trends*, pp. 119–155; Idel, *The Mystical Experience*; Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia*; Hames, *Like Angels on Jacob's Ladder*; Idel, "Abraham Abulafia," pp. 11–15; idem, "Maimonides and Kabbalah," pp. 58–62; idem, "Abraham Abulafia, un kabbaliste mystique," *La vie spirituelle* 68 (1988), pp. 381–392; and idem, "Maimonides' Guide of the Perplexed," pp. 206–208.
2. On this issue see chaps. 3 and 6.
3. For a detailed description of these techniques see Idel, *The Mystical Experience*; and chap. 5 of this volume.
4. See a bibliographical description of these lost writings in Idel, "Abraham Abulafia," pp. 11–15.
5. See Abraham Abulafia, *Sefer 'Otzar 'Eden Ganuz*, Ms. Oxford, Bodleiana 1580, fol. 164b; as well as a fragment from the *Commentary on Sefer ha-'Edut*, Ms. Munich 43, printed by Henrich Graetz, "Abraham Abulafia, der Pseudomessias," *Monatschrift für Geschichte und Wissenschaft des Judentums* 36 (1887), p. 558.
6. See Idel, "Maimonides and Kabbalah," pp. 58–62; and later in this chapter.
7. For a portrait of this mystic see Moshe Idel, "Abraham Abulafia, un kabbaliste mystique," *La vie spirituelle* 68 (1988), pp. 381–392; Hames, *Like Angels on Jacob's Ladder*.
8. Ms. Oxford, Bodleiana 1580, fol. 164a–b. For a detailed analysis see Idel, "Maimonides and Kabbalah," pp. 60–63; and idem, "Maimonides' Guide of the Perplexed," pp. 206–208.
9. Abulafia, *Sefer ha-'Ot*, p. 76. See also *ibid.*, p. 86.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 76.
11. *Ibid.* For another instance of discussing secrets of the Torah with a gentile see Abraham Abulafia, *Mafteah ha-Hokhmot*, Ms. Parma 141, fol. 29b.
12. See Abulafia, *Sefer ha-'Ot*, pp. 75, 78.
13. The poetic opening to his book *Sefer Hayyei ha-'Olam ha-Ba'*, printed by Jellinek as an appendix to Abulafia's *Sefer ha-'Ot*, p. 87. For the propagandistic activity of Abulafia see also his *Commentary on Sefer ha-Yashar*, Ms. Rome, Casanatense 38, fol. 41a.
14. Scholem, *Major Trends*, p. 122.
15. See Jellinek, *Beth ha-Midrasch*, 3: xlvi.
16. See Idel, *The Mystical Experience*, pp. 22–24.
17. Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, pp. 98–99.
18. Jellinek, *Beth ha-Midrasch*, 3: xli.
19. The very few other significant discussions in Spain of the combinations of letters are found in Kabbalists who either were Ashkenazi by extraction or drew their inspiration from Hasidei Ashkenaz. See Idel, *The Mystical Experience*, p. 45 n. 38; and idem, "Ashkenazi Esotericism and Kabbalah in Barcelona," *Hispania Judaica Bulletin* 5 (2007), pp. 69–113.
20. Jellinek, *Beth ha-Midrasch*, 3: xlvi–xlvii.
21. In general, Abulafia's attitude to several central topics in Jewish esotericism is drastically different from that of theosophical-theurgical Spanish Kabbalah. See Idel, "Maimonides and Kabbalah," pp. 31–79; and idem, "The Kabbalistic Interpretations of the Secret of 'Arayyot in Early Kabbalah," *Kabbalah* 12 (2004), pp. 157–185, 199 (Hebrew).
22. Gershom Scholem, *The Qabbalah of Sefer ha-Temunah and of Abraham Abulafia*, ed. J. ben Shlomo (Akademon, Jerusalem, 1969), pp. 229–239.
23. See Jellinek, *Beth ha-Midrasch*, 3: xlvi.
24. In fact we can easily understand the evolution of Spanish Kabbalah either before or after Abulafia without resorting to ecstatic Kabbalah. However, this is impossible in the cases of Italian, Byzantine, and Middle Eastern Kabbalah.
25. Symptomatically, Abulafia has influenced two philosophers living in Spain, R. Abraham Shalom and R. Moshe Narboni; see Idel, *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah*, pp. 63–71.
26. Idel, "Abraham Abulafia," pp. 3–68.
27. See Idel, "The Study Program," pp. 330–331.
28. See Abulafia's epistle *Ve-Zot li-Yhudah*, pp. 15, 19.
29. Wirszubski, *Pico della Mirandola*, p. 63; Reuchlin, *On the Art of the Kabbalah*, p. 92; Gershom Scholem, *Die Erforschung der Kabbala von Reuchlin bis zur Gegenwart* (Selbstverlag der Stadt, Pforzheim, 1969), pp. 11–12. In his thoroughgoing presentation of this distinction in *Major Trends*, p. 124, Scholem proposes this theory concerning the divergence between ecstatic and theosophical Kabbalah as his own, without mentioning Abulafia as a source. For a more detailed examination of Abulafia's own definition of Kabbalah as distinct from the theosophical one see Idel, "Defining Kabbalah" and "On the Meanings of the Term 'Kabbalah,'" pp. 69–73.
30. Idel, *The Mystical Experience*, pp. 14–17, 22–23.
31. See Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, pp. 112–136, 156–172, 173–176, 191–194; and idem, "On the Doctrine of Divinity at the Beginning of Kabbalah," in *Shefa Tal: Studies in Jewish Thought and Culture Presented to Bracha Sack*, ed. Z. Gries, Ch. Kreisel, and B. Huss (Ben Gurion University Press, Beer Sheva, 2004), pp. 131–148 (Hebrew).
32. See Idel, *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah*, pp. 91–96.
33. See *ibid.*, pp. 126–132, 136–140.
34. Idel, *The Mystical Experience*, pp. 61–64.
35. Idel, *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah*, pp. 131–134.

36. Idel, *Hasidism*, pp. 56–60. See also M. Idel, “On Prophecy and Early Hasidism,” in *Studies in Modern Religions: Religious Movements and Babi-Baha'i Faiths*, ed. Moshe Sharon (Brill, Leiden, 2004), pp. 68–70.
37. See Moshe Idel, “R. Menahem Mendel of Shklov and R. Avraham Abulafia,” in *The Vilna Gaon and His Disciples*, ed. M. Hallamish, Y. Rivlin, and R. Shuhat (Bar Ilan University Press, Ramat Gan, 2003), pp. 173–183 (Hebrew).
38. See, e.g., Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia*; and Hames, *Like Angels on Jacob's Ladder*.
39. Amnon Gross, personal communication to author, 2002.

ABRAHAM ABULAFIA'S ACTIVITY IN ITALY

1. For more on Rome as the locus of eschatological events see Idel, *Messianic Mystics*, pp. 82–84, 332 n. 65. See now also Hames, *Like Angels on Jacob's Ladder*, pp. 71–88.
2. Nahmanides, *'Otzar ha-Vikkūhim*, ed. Y. D. Eisenstein (Reznik, New York, 1928), p. 88.
3. Idel, “Abraham Abulafia,” pp. 11–12, 42–43 n. 43.
4. Namely Capua in gematria.
5. This is one of the designations that Abulafia took for himself, as it amounts in gematria to the numerical value of Abraham, namely 248.
6. *Ziv ha-shekhinah*. This rabbinic term was interpreted in ecstatic Kabbalah as pointing to an ecstatic experience. See Idel, *Language, Torah, and Hermeneutics*, pp. 32–33.
7. This may be a remark pointing to anthropomorphic understandings of the divinity, influential in some circles in contemporary Italy. See Israel M. Ta-Shma, “*Nimmuqi Humash le-Rabbi Isaiah mi-Trani*,” *Qiryat Sefer* 64 (1992–93), pp. 751–753 (Hebrew).
8. Abraham Abulafia, *Sefer Sitrei Torah*, Ms. Paris, BN 774, fol. 120a.
9. See Idel, “Abraham Abulafia,” pp. 62–68.
10. Abraham Abulafia, *Sefer 'Otzar 'Eden Ganuz*, Ms. Oxford, Bodleiana 1580, fol. 165b; Jellinek, *Beth ha-Midrasch*, 3: xli.
11. See Abulafia, *Sefer 'Otzar 'Eden Ganuz*, fol. 164a. On the somewhat earlier and more famous figure see Israel M. Ta-Shma, “R. Jesaiah di Trani the Elder and His Connections with Byzantium and Palestine,” *Shalem* 4 (1984), p. 411 (Hebrew).
12. See Idel, *The Mystical Experience*, pp. 197–200; and idem, “On the History of the Interdiction against the Study of Kabbalah before the Age of Forty,” *AJS Review* 5 (1980), pp. 1–20 (Hebrew Section).
13. This is one of the names Abulafia took for himself. Raziel is numerically equivalent to Abraham. See Harar, *Sha'arei Tzedeq*, pp. 47–51.
14. Hitboded. On this significance of this text see Idel, *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah*, pp. 108–111.
15. Abraham Abulafia, *Commentary on Sefer ha-'Edut*, Ms. Munich 43, fols. 203b–204a, printed by Heinrich Graetz, “Abraham Abulafia der Pseudo-Messias,” *Monatschrift für Geschichte und Wissenschaft des Judentums* 36 (1887), p. 558.
16. See Augustin Demski, *Pabst Nicholas III—Eine Monographie* (H. Schöningh, Münster, 1903), p. 347 n. 2. Abulafia's testimony regarding the pope's sudden demise, “he was suddenly smitten by a plague, and on that night he was slain and died,” corresponds to an amazing degree with the Christian sources, which emphasize the suddenness of

the pope's demise. Demski collects these sources, *ibid.*, p. 348 n. 1. I offer here two examples: “Item iste Nicholaus Papa Postae existens in Castro Firmando (Soriano) loquelam suam perdidit et subito ipse decessit”; “Dominus Johannes Gaitanus Papa nominatus Dominus Nicolaus Papa IV [sic] obiit non bono modo sine poenitentia ut dicebatur.” Another source, also recorded in Demski, *ibid.*, describes the pope's death as follows: “Nicolaus Papa III, in castro Suriano existens subito factus apopleticus, sine loquela moritur.” The word *subito* (suddenly) recurs in two of these texts, whereas the third text emphasizes the strange nature of his death, and apparently comes closest to Abulafia's “smitten by a plague.” These texts also corroborate Abulafia's version of the pope's death in Soriano.

17. Abraham Abulafia, *Sefer ha-'Edut*, Ms. Rome, Angelica 38, fols. 14b–15a; Ms. Munich 285, fol. 39b; see also Idel, *The Mystical Experience*, pp. 126–127, 199. The Hebrew original of the passage is printed in the Hebrew edition of this book (Magnes Press, Jerusalem, 1988), pp. 110–111, 154. See also Idel, *Absorbing Perfections*, pp. 336–338.
18. For more on this passage see Idel, *Messianic Mystics*, pp. 82–84. On Abulafia and messianism see also Idel, *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah*, pp. 45–62. This allegorical technique is representative of Abulafia's hermeneutics, covered further in chap. 5 of this volume.
19. M. Idel, “On Symbolic Self-Interpretations in Thirteenth-Century Jewish Writings,” *Hebrew University Studies in Literature and the Arts* 16 (1988), pp. 90–96.
20. Seyirim. See Leviticus 17:7, in Asher Weiser, ed., *Abraham ibn Ezra's Commentary on the Pentateuch*, vol. 3 (Mossad ha-Rav Kook, Jerusalem, 1976), p. 53. On the danger of goats, plausibly pointing to demonic powers, when met on Friday evening, see already in the talmudic discussions and *Mahzor Vitry*, by R. Simhah, a student of Rashi, ed. Shimeon ha-Levi Horowitz (reprint; Bolka, Jerusalem, 1963), p. 81 (Hebrew). These sources discuss the term *sakkānat se'yirim*, apparently following a biblical theme. See also Nahmanides on Leviticus 16:8 for the nexus between Sammael and goats; and Louis Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews*, vol. 5 (JPS, Philadelphia, 1968), p. 312.
21. Abulafia, *Sefer ha-'Ot*, p. 67. For more on issues contained in this passage see Moshe Idel, “The Time of the End: Apocalypticism and Its Spiritualization in Abraham Abulafia's Eschatology,” in *Apocalyptic Time*, ed. Albert Baumgarten (Brill, Leiden, 2000), pp. 155–186.
22. Abulafia, *Sefer ha-'Ot*, p. 67. BYT in gematria is 21, the gematria of the divine name 'EHeYeH.
23. See the text translated and analyzed in Idel, *Language, Torah, and Hermeneutics*, p. 105.
24. Abraham Abulafia, *Sefer 'Ish 'Adam*, Ms. Rome, Angelica 38, fol. 3a.
25. This is a play on the Hebrew consonants of the name of the town Messina.
26. Abulafia, *Sefer 'Otzar 'Eden Ganuz*, fol. 165b.
27. Namely sometime in the fall of 1285.
28. Abulafia, *Sefer 'Otzar 'Eden Ganuz*, fol. 166a.
29. *Ibid.* For more on his fantasies and visions see Idel, *The Mystical Experience*, pp. 144–145.
30. Abraham Abulafia, *Sefer Mafteah ha-Hokhmot*, Ms. Moscow, Guensburg 133, fol. 1a, reproduced in Idel, “Abraham Abulafia,” p. 20.

31. On the possible relationship between the name of this student of Abulafia and Lessing's *Nathan the Wise*, see Harar, *Sha'arei Tzedeq*, pp. 32, 345–346.
32. On this book see Idel, *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah*, pp. 91–92.
33. Abulafia, *Sefer Mafteah ha-Hokhmot*, fol. 1a, reproduced in Idel, "Abraham Abulafia," p. 20.
34. Abulafia, *Ve-Zot li-Yhudah*, p. 19. On this controversy see Moshe Idel, "R. Shlomo ibn Adret and Abraham Abulafia: For the History of a Neglected Polemic," in *Atara L'Haim: Studies in the Talmud and Medieval Rabbinic Literature in Honor of Professor Haim Zalman Dimitrovsky*, ed. D. Boyarin et al. (Magnes Press, Jerusalem, 2000), pp. 235–251 (Hebrew).
35. In his *Responsa* I, 548, printed now in *Teshuvot ha-Rashba*, ed. H. Z. Dimitrovsky, vol. 1 (Mossad ha-Rav Kook, Jerusalem, 1990), p. 101, he mentions his writings and those of the holy communities in Sicily. The use of the plural shows that it was not only to Palermo that Ibn Adret wrote in this context.
36. Ibid.; and Idel, "R. Shlomo ibn Adret and Abraham Abulafia."
37. See Idel, *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah*, pp. 91–92.
38. See Abulafia, *Ve-Zot li-Yhudah*, pp. 13–28.
39. Abulafia, *Sefer ha-'Ot*, p. 85.
40. Abulafia, *Sheva' Netivot ha-Torah*, pp. 1–24.
41. See Idel, *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah*, pp. 91–92.
42. Abulafia, *Sefer 'Otzar 'Eden Ganuz*, fol. 55a.
43. Abulafia, *Ve-Zot li-Yhudah*, p. 19. On this passage see Idel, "On the Meanings of the Term 'Kabbalah,'" pp. 40–42; and Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia*, pp. 99–107. For Abulafia's own interpretations of the Trinity, see Idel, *Ben*, pp. 315–318.
44. François Secret, "L'Ensis Pauli de Paulus de Heredia," *Sefarad* 26 (1966), pp. 79–102, 254–271, especially p. 100.

ECSTATIC KABBALAH AS AN EXPERIENTIAL LORE

1. For a survey of this understanding of Kabbalah see Moshe Idel, "On the Theologization of Kabbalah in Modern Scholarship," in *Religious Apologetics—Philosophical Argumentation*, ed. Y. Schwartz and V. Krech (J. C. B. Mohr, Tübingen, 2004), pp. 165–167. For more on this issue see the beginning of chap. 9 in this volume.
2. For a survey of changing attitudes toward Abulafia's Kabbalah in recent scholarship see Scholem, *Major Trends*, pp. 119–155; Moshe Idel, "The Contribution of Abraham Abulafia's Kabbalah to the Understanding of Jewish Mysticism," in *Gershom Scholem's Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism: Fifty Years After*, ed. P. Schaefer and J. Dan (J. C. B. Mohr, Tübingen, 1993), pp. 117–143; Ronald Kiener, "From Ba'al ha-Zohar to Prophet to Ecstatic: The Vicissitudes of Abulafia in Contemporary Scholarship," *ibid.*, pp. 145–159; Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia*; and Hames, *Like Angels on Jacob's Ladder*.
3. On techniques in Jewish mysticism see Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, pp. 74–111; and *idem*, *Enchanted Chains*, *passim*.
4. See Paul Fenton, "La 'Hitbodedut' chez les premiers Qabbalistes en Orient et chez les Soufis," in *Prière, mystique et judaïsme*, ed. R. Goetschel (Presses Universitaires de

- France, Paris, 1987), pp. 133–157; Moshe Idel, "Hitbodedut: On Solitude in Jewish Mysticism," in *Einsamkeit: Archäologie der literarischen Kommunikation*, vol. 6, ed. Aleida Assmann and Jan Assmann (Wilhelm Fink Verlag, Munich, 2000), pp. 192–198.
5. See Idel, *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah*, pp. 103–109; *idem*, "Hitbodedut as Concentration in Jewish Philosophy," in *Shlomo Pines Jubilee Volume on the Occasion of His Eightieth Birthday*, ed. Moshe Idel, Zeev W. Harvey, and E. Schweid, vol. 1 (Magnes Press, Jerusalem, 1988), pp. 39–60 (Hebrew); Sara Klein-Braslavy, "Prophecy, Clairvoyance, and Dreams and the Concept of 'Hitbodedut' in Gersonides' Thought," *Da'at* 39 (1997), pp. 23–68 (Hebrew).
 6. *Yitboded*. This term can also be translated here as "concentrate."
 7. Abraham Abulafia, *Matzrefla-Kesef*, Ms. Sassoon 56, fols. 33b–34a. On this passage see also Idel, "Hitbodedut: On Solitude in Jewish Mysticism," p. 195.
 8. Abraham Abulafia, *Sefer ha-Hesheq*, Ms. New York, JTS 1801, fol. 9a, corrected in accordance with the quotation of this passage in Ms. London, British Library 749, fols. 12a–b, where Abulafia's passage has been copied in R. Hayyim Vital's *Sha'arei Qedushah* under the mistaken title *Hayyei ha-'Olam ha-Ba'*. Even so, it is essentially a better version of the unique extant manuscript of *Sefer ha-Hesheq*.
 9. *Simhah shel mitzvah*. Cf. BT, *Sabbath*, fol. 30a.
 10. Eleazar of Worms, *Sefer Sodei Razayya'*, Ms. Oxford, Bodleiana 1572, fol. 130a.
 11. Psalms 33:2, 47:7, 66:2, etc.
 12. Cf. *Mekhilta* on Exodus 18:19; and Boaz Cohen, *Law and Tradition in Judaism* (JTS, New York, 1959), p. 24 n. 70.
 13. Eleazar of Worms, *Perushai Siddur ha-Tefillah la-Roqeah*, ed. M. Hershler and Y. A. Hershler, vol. 1 (Makhon ha-rav Herschler, Jerusalem, 1992), p. 145. See also *ibid.*, p. 149.
 14. See BT, *Sabbath*, fol. 30b. Cf. the texts of R. Eleazar of Worms quoted earlier.
 15. Abraham Abulafia, *Sefer 'Otzar 'Eden Ganuz*, Ms. Oxford, Bodleiana 1580, fol. 62a; Idel, *The Mystical Experience*, pp. 61–62.
 16. Abulafia, *Sefer 'Otzar 'Eden Ganuz*, fols. 59b–60a. On the kiss of death as a moment of ecstasy in other texts of Abulafia see Idel, *The Mystical Experience*, pp. 180–184.
 17. Abulafia, *Sefer 'Otzar 'Eden Ganuz*, fols. 60a–b.
 18. See the anonymous Ms. Paris, BN 848, fol. 7b; and Adam Afterman, *The Intention of Prayers in Early Ecstatic Kabbalah* (Cherub Press, Los Angeles, 2004), pp. 25–26, 285–286 (Hebrew). See also below, notes 43 and 45.
 19. See Idel, *The Mystical Experience*, pp. 13–71.
 20. Abraham Abulafia, *Sefer Mafteah ha-Re'ayon*, Ms. Vatican 291, fol. 21a.
 21. Abulafia, *Sefer 'Otzar 'Eden Ganuz*, fols. 163b–164a.
 22. Aristotle, *Metaphysics* XII.7.1072b; *idem*, *Ethics* VII.1174a–1176a. For Maimonides see *Hilkhot Teshuvah* 8:2; *Haqdamah le-Perek Heleq*, *Sefer ha-Ma'or* (Tel Aviv, 1948), pp. 121–122; Maimonides, *Guide of the Perplexed*, trans. Shlomo Pines (University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1963), pt. III, chap. 51. Maimonides emphasized that the pleasure that accompanies apprehension "does not belong to the genus of bodily pleasures."
 23. Maimonides, *Guide of the Perplexed*, pt. III, chap. 51.

24. Idel, *The Mystical Experience*, p. 125.
25. Abraham Abulafia, *Hayyei ha-'Olam ha-Ba'*, Ms. Oxford, Bodleiana 1582, fol. 14b. See also Idel, "Maimonides and Kabbalah," pp. 77–78. For more on the death by a kiss in Kabbalah in general see Idel, *The Mystical Experience*, pp. 180–184; and more recently Michael Fishbane, *The Kiss of God* (University of Washington Press, Seattle, 1994), pp. 39–41.
26. Abraham Abulafia, *Sefer Sitrei Torah*, Ms. Paris, BN 774, fol. 117a.
27. Idem, *Sefer ha-Ge'ulah*, Ms. Leipzig 39, fol. 4b.
28. Idem, *Sefer Hayyei ha-Nefesh*, Ms. Munich 408, fol. 1b.
29. Idem, *Sefer Sitrei Torah*, fol. 115b. For more on the figure 177 in Abulafia's thought see Idel, "Maimonides' Guide of the Perplexed," pp. 212–216.
30. Untitled fragment in the untitled, anonymous Ms. Florence, Laurenziana-Medicea Plut. II, 48, fol. 89b. On this manuscript see the identification of Abulafia as author and the discussion in M. Idel, "A Unique Manuscript of an Untitled Treatise of Abraham Abulafia in Biblioteca Laurenziana-Medicea," *Kabbalah* 17 (2008), pp. 7–28.
31. Abulafia, *Hayyei ha-'Olam ha-Ba'*, fols. 4b–5a.
32. Ibid., fol. 54a.
33. Ibid., fols. 4b–5a. On the allegorical understanding of the "congregation of Israel" in Abulafia's thought see Idel, *The Mystical Experience*, pp. 211–212 n. 36; and Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia*, pp. 66, 127, 215.
34. Abraham Abulafia, *'Or ha-Sekhel*, Ms. Vatican 233, fol. 127b.
35. Abulafia, *Sefer ha-Hesheq*, fol. 35b.
36. See, e.g., Deuteronomy 4:4. On the importance of the unitive expressions in both Kabbalah and Hasidism, see Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, pp. 36–73; and idem, "Universalization and Integration: Two Conceptions of Mystical Union in Jewish Mysticism," in *Mystical Union and Monotheistic Faith: An Ecumenical Dialogue*, ed. M. Idel and B. McGinn (Macmillan, New York, 1989), pp. 27–58, 157–161, 195–203.
37. Namely the Agent Intellect, envisioned as Metatron. For more on this passage see Idel, *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah*, p. 10.
38. Abraham Abulafia, *Commentary on Sefer ha-Yashar*, Ms. Rome, Angelica 38, fols. 31b–32a; Scholem, *Major Trends*, p. 382; Idel, *The Mystical Experience*, p. 126.
39. See Idel, *Language, Torah, and Hermeneutics*, p. 109. Gikatilla's *Sha'ar ha-Niqqud* was printed in a collection of early kabbalistic tracts titled 'Arzei Levanon (Venice, 1601), fol. 38a. This collection was reprinted in 1748 in Kraków, and later in Koretz, and Hasidic masters quoted it; see Moshe Idel, "The Magical and Theurgic Interpretation of Music in Hebrew Texts from the Renaissance to Hasidism," *Yuval* 4 (1982), p. 61 n. 164 (Hebrew). Compare also some texts of Abulafia and his school, discussed in Idel, *Language, Torah, and Hermeneutics*, pp. 18–19; and R. Joseph Gikatilla's *Sha'arei 'Orah*, ed. J. ben Shlomo, vol. 1 (Mossad Bialik, Jerusalem 1970), pp. 48, 206, and *passim*. See also the view of R. Elijah de Vidas, dealt with in Idel, *Hasidism*, pp. 171–172, 179, where cleaving to God is also related to linguistic elements. Compare also Scholem's remark that the formula used by Hasidic masters in order to convey the idea of cleaving to God, *devequt ha-Shem*, may be related to views of Gikatilla found in (the unfortunately unmentioned) manuscripts of this Kabbalist. See Gershom Scholem, "Two First Testimonies on the Contrarities of Hasidism and the Besht," *Tarbitz* 20 (1950), p. 236 (Hebrew); and the different opinion of Tishby, *The Wisdom of the Zohar*, 2: 302 n. 151.
40. Abulafia, *Sefer Sitrei Torah*, fol. 140a.
41. Abraham Abulafia, *Shomer Mitzvah*, Ms. Paris, BN 853, fol. 48b. On this view of Kabbalah, which assumes both mystical and magical aspects, see my discussion of the mystico-magical model in *Hasidism*, pp. 95–102.
42. Abulafia, *Sefer Sitrei Torah*, fol. 115b.
43. *ha-Mitzvot* (commandments) = 541 = *sekhel ha-po'el* (Agent Intellect). On this gematria see Moshe Idel, "The Kabbalistic Interpretations of the Secret of 'Arayyot in Early Kabbalah," *Kabbalah* 12 (2004), pp. 157–159 (Hebrew). See also below, note 45; and chap. 5 of this volume.
44. In Hebrew the consonants of *ha-ner*, "candle," are the same as those of *nahar*, "river." On a different understanding of this verse, especially the term "river," see M. Hellner-Eshed, "A River Issues Forth from Eden": *On the Language of Mystical Experience in the Zohar* ('Alma 'Am 'Oved, Tel Aviv, 2005) (Hebrew).
45. Untitled fragment, Ms. Florence, Laurenziana-Medicea Plut. II, 48, fols. 79a–b. On the possible authorship of this treatise, see note 30 above. The affinity between letters and the knowledge of the Agent Intellect means that the cosmic intellect is attained by means of the combination of letters. Thus also the term "commandments," which amounts in gematria to *shekhel ha-po'el*, means that the letters of the commandments can be used in order to attain the Agent Intellect.
46. Compare other expressions of this view discussed in Idel, *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah*, pp. 13, 15–16.
47. Abulafia, *Sheva' Netivot ha-Torah*, p. 8; Idel, "Abraham Abulafia," pp. 86–87, 92–93, 96, 98–99, 103. On the possible importance of this unique status of language as a form of cognition higher than imagination for later developments in the description of man as having the "form of speech," as in Dante Alighieri, for example, I hope to elaborate elsewhere. See, for the time being, Eco, *The Search for the Perfect Language*, pp. 48–52.
48. *Metzuyyar ba-sekhel*. On the term *tzifyur* as forming a concept see Harry A. Wolfson, "The Terms *Tasawwur* and *Tasdiq* in Arabic Philosophy and Their Greek, Latin and Hebrew Equivalents," *Moslem World*, April 1943, pp. 1–15.
49. Abulafia, *Sefer Hayyei ha-Nefesh*, fols. 91a–b.
50. Abulafia, *Sefer ha-'Ot*, p. 79.
51. Ms. Florence, Laurenziana-Medicea Plut. II, 48, fol. 72a.
52. Abulafia, *Sefer 'Otzar 'Eden Ganuz*, fol. 157b.
53. On the phrase "the way of prophecy" see Idel, *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah*, p. 144 n. 22.
54. R. Aharon ha-Kohen Perlov of Apt, *'Or ha-Ganuz le-Tzaddiqim* (Zolkiew, 1800), fols. 46a–b. On this book see Hayyim Lieberman, *'Ohel RaHeL* (privately printed, New York, 1980), pp. 8–11 (Hebrew). A partial version of this passage is found in R. Aharon of Apt's *Sefer Keter Nehora* (Benei Beraq, 1980), unpaginated introduction, *haqdamah sheniyah*, para. 7.
55. E.g., R. Aharon ha-Kohen, *'Or ha-Ganuz le-Tzaddiqim*, fols. 17b, 18a.

1. See Scholem, *On the Kabbalah*, pp. 5–32; W. Bacher, “L'exégèse biblique dans le *Zohar*,” *REJ* 22 (1891), pp. 33–46, especially pp. 37–40. See also *idem*, “Das Merkwort PRDS in der Jüdischen Bibellexegese,” *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 13 (1893), pp. 294–305; Peretz Sandler, “On the Question of Pardes and the Fourfold Method,” in *Sefer Eliahu Auerbach*, ed. A. Biram (Qiryat Sefer, Jerusalem, 1955), pp. 222–235 (Hebrew). See also A. van der Heide, “Pardes: Methodological Reflections on the Theory of Four Senses,” *Journal of Jewish Studies* 34 (1983), pp. 147–159; Idel, *Absorbing Perfections*, pp. 429–435. Some of the following discussions draw upon this last book, where additional bibliography is found.
2. See Idel, *Language, Torah, and Hermeneutics*, pp. 82–124.
3. See already the interpretation of *Hagigah* in *Ba'alei ha-Tosafot*, fol. 11b.
4. Abraham Abulafia, *Hayyei ha-'Olam ha-Ba'*, Ms. Paris, BN 777, fol. 108a.
5. Scholem, *Origins of the Kabbalah*, pp. 387–388.
6. Exegetical techniques were explored in great detail by Ashkenazi Hasidim; see Joseph Dan, “The Ashkenazi Hasidic ‘Gates of Wisdom,’” in *Hommage à Georges Vajda*, ed. G. Nahon and C. Touati (Peeters, Louvain, 1980), pp. 183–189; and Ivan G. Marcus, “Exegesis for the Few and for the Many: Judah he-Hasid’s Biblical Commentary,” in *The Age of the Zohar*, ed. J. Dan (Institute of Jewish Studies, Hebrew University, Jerusalem, 1989), pp. 1–24. In Kabbalah they were adopted in Abulafia’s hermeneutics; see Idel, *Language, Torah, and Hermeneutics*, pp. 95–119; and *idem*, “Abulafia’s Secrets of the Guide: A Linguistic Turn,” in *Perspectives on Jewish Thought and Mysticism*, ed. Alfred Ivri, E. R. Wolfson, and A. Arkush (Harwood Academic Publishers, Amsterdam, 1998), pp. 289–329.
7. See Idel, “Maimonides and Kabbalah,” pp. 73–74.
8. Abraham Abulafia, *Sefer Mafteah ha-Hokhmot*, Ms. Moscow, Guensburg 133, fols. 7b–8a. See a very similar discussion, *ibid.*, fol. 12b; and Idel, *Absorbing Perfections*, pp. 269–270.
9. Abulafia, *Sefer Mafteah ha-Hokhmot*, fol. 25a. See Idel, *Absorbing Perfections*, p. 262.
10. See Daniel Matt, “The Old-New Words: The Aura of Secrecy in the *Zohar*,” in *Gershom Scholem’s Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism: Fifty Years After*, ed. P. Schaefer and J. Dan (J. C. B. Mohr, Tübingen, 1993), pp. 200–202.
11. Abulafia, *Sefer Mafteah ha-Hokhmot*, fols. 20a–b; and Idel, *Absorbing Perfections*, pp. 327–328. See also Abulafia, *Sheva' Netivot ha-Torah*, pp. 3–4, discussed in Idel, *Language, Torah, and Hermeneutics*, pp. 100–101.
12. Idel, *Absorbing Perfections*, pp. 80–110.
13. On the interpretations of the forefathers’ names in Abulafia see Idel, *The Mystical Experience*, pp. 127–128.
14. Abulafia, *Sefer Mafteah ha-Hokhmot*, fol. 23b; Idel, *Language, Torah, and Hermeneutics*, p. 111.
15. Abulafia, *Sefer Mafteah ha-Hokhmot*, fol. 19b; Idel, *Language, Torah, and Hermeneutics*, p. 111.
16. Abulafia, *Sefer Mafteah ha-Hokhmot*, fol. 20a; Idel, *Language, Torah, and Hermeneutics*, p. 111.
17. Abulafia, *Sefer Mafteah ha-Hokhmot*, fol. 20a; Idel, *Language, Torah, and Hermeneutics*, p. 111.
18. Abulafia, *Sefer Mafteah ha-Hokhmot*, fol. 20a; Idel, *Language, Torah, and Hermeneutics*, p. 111.

19. In the original *lefī mishpat*, which regularly means “according to judgment.”
20. Abulafia, *Sefer Mafteah ha-Hokhmot*, fols. 23b–24a.
21. Abraham Abulafia, *Commentary on Sefer ha-'Edut*, Ms. Rome, Angelica 38, fol. 9a; Ms. Munich 285, fol. 13a; Idel, *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah*, p. 66; and *idem*, *The Mystical Experience*, pp. 127, 140. See also the passages translated and analyzed in Idel, *Messianic Mystics*, pp. 71–72, 82–83.
22. Abulafia, *Commentary on Sefer ha-'Edut*, Ms. Rome, Angelica 38, fols. 14b–15a; Ms. Munich 285, fol. 39b; see also Idel, *The Mystical Experience*, pp. 126–127, 199; *idem*, *Messianic Mystics*, pp. 82–83. For more on the context of this passage see chap. 6 of this volume.
23. Abulafia, *Commentary on Sefer ha-'Edut*, Ms. Munich 285, fol. 39b. For more on the pun *Mosheh/ha-Shem* in the thirteenth century see Idel, *Enchanted Chains*, pp. 81–82.
24. Idel, *The Mystical Experience*, pp. 127–128.
25. Written in a defective manner, without *Vav*.
26. For other, similar expressions in Abulafia and his followers see Idel, *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah*, pp. 11–12; *idem*, “On Symbolic Self-Interpretations in Thirteenth-Century Jewish Writings,” *Hebrew University Studies in Literature and the Arts* 16 (1988), pp. 90–96.
27. Harar, *Sha'arei Tzedeq*, p. 484. This passage should also be read in the context of another quotation from the same book, discussed in Idel, *Language, Torah, and Hermeneutics*, p. 17. On this passage see Georges Vajda, who translated it into French in a supplement to his article “Deux chapitres de l’histoire du conflit entre la Kabbale et la philosophie: La polémique anti-intellectualiste de Joseph b. Shalom Ashkenazi,” *Archives d’histoire doctrinale et littéraire du Moyen Age* 31 (1956), pp. 131–132; and Idel, *Absorbing Perfections*, pp. 332–335.
28. On part of this passage and its possible affinity to a view of Dante’s see Eco, *The Search for the Perfect Language*, pp. 48–50. The possibility of a contact between Dante’s and Abulafia’s views on language is strengthened by the fact that Abulafia’s former teacher, R. Hillel of Verona, spent some years in Forli, where Dante was exiled. On Dante as a prophet—a self-consciousness reminiscent of Abulafia’s—there are several studies, the most recent of which seems to be that of Raffaello Morghen, *Dante profeta* (Jaca, Milan, 1983), where previous studies are discussed. See also Giuseppe Mazzotta, *Dante, Poet of the Desert: History and Allegory in the Divine Comedy* (Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1979).
29. On the easy way in ecstatic Kabbalah see Idel, “Defining Kabbalah,” pp. 121–122.

ESCHATOLOGICAL THEMES AND DIVINE NAMES IN ABULAFIA'S KABBALAH

1. Namely redemption.
2. Or, according to another plausible interpretation, “In the name of.”
3. See Abulafia, *Sefer ha-'Ot*, p. 76, where a revelation is described as stemming from ‘Adonay, while later in the same book he predicts that the Tetragrammaton will awaken the heart of the shepherd to act as a redeemer.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 79.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 74.
6. Abraham Abulafia, *Sefer ha-Melammed*, Ms. Paris, BN 680, fol. 308a. The binary vision of this text, as well as that of R. Nathan Harar in his *Sha'arei Tzedeq*, is seminal in Abulafia's thought, especially in the important topic of the continuous struggle between the faculties of intellect and imagination. See Idel, *The Mystical Experience*, pp. 144–145; idem, *Absorbing Perfections*, pp. 438–460; and idem, "The Battle of the Urges: Psychomachia in the Prophetic Kabbalah of Abraham Abulafia," in *Peace and War in Jewish Culture*, ed. Avriel Bar-Levav (Center Zalman Shazar, Jerusalem, 2006), pp. 99–143 (Hebrew). Thus, the historical binary vision reflects the psychological one. Both in history and in psychology, Abulafia prefers a binary vision rather than a triadic one, as found for example in the rabbinic and in Joachim of Fiori's understandings of history as consisting of three major stages. Abulafia also expressed little interest in the division of the six thousand years into three periods of two millennia, widespread in both Jewish and Christian eschatology. See Idel, *Messianic Mystics*, p. 19 and the pertinent footnotes. In my opinion, the first and main impetus for Abulafia's messianism was the belief, widespread among Jews in Europe, that the victories of the Mongols—imagined to be one or more of the ten lost Jewish tribes—meant also the beginning of the redemption of Israel. I have discussed the evidence in *ibid.*, pp. 8, 81, 134, and the pertinent bibliography.
7. See a similar discussion in Joseph Gikatilla's text adduced by Gottlieb, *Studies*, p. 114 n. 41.
8. Abraham Abulafia, *Commentary on Sefer ha-'Edut*, Ms. Munich 285, fol. 37a.
9. See P. R. Biassiotto, *History of the Development of Devotion to the Holy Name* (St. Bonaventure College and Seminary, New York, 1943), pp. 69–71; and Augustin Demski, *Pabst Nicholas III—Eine Monographie* (H. Schöningh, Münster, 1903), p. 17.
10. Biassiotto, *History*, pp. 71–76. In a later period we witness a spiritual phenomenon altogether similar to that of Abulafia, in the person and activity of St. Bernardine of Siena, who dedicated his life to preaching and sermonizing on the theme of the holy name of Jesus. For him, as for Abulafia, the divine name became the essence of religion. See L. McAodha, "The Holy Name in the Preaching of St. Bernardine of Siena," *Franciscan Studies* 29 (1969), pp. 42–58.
11. See Scholem, *Sabbatai Sevi*, pp. 210–211, 282–284.
12. Abraham Abulafia, *Sefer 'Ozar 'Eden Ganuz*, Ms. Oxford, Bodleiana 1580, fol. 41a.
13. For more on this issue see Idel, *Language, Torah, and Hermeneutics*, pp. 24–27.
14. On the nexus between divine names in the Bible and divine attributes in ancient Judaism see A. Marmorstein, *The Old Rabbinic Doctrine of God*, vol. 1 (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1927), p. 44; N. A. Dahl and A. F. Segal, "Philo and the Rabbis on the Names of God," *Journal for the Study of Judaism* 9 (1978), pp. 1–28; Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, pp. 128–136. On the importance of theophorism in Jewish thought see Idel, *Ben*.
15. Abulafia, *Sefer ha-'Ot*, p. 76.
16. *Ibid.*
17. This view may have some affinity to the midrashic vision of the change of the names of the angels by God at the time of the destruction of the Temple, in order to prevent invocations by Jewish masters, or magicians, who would attempt to oppose the destruction of the Temple.
18. The passage refers to the powers of the names. On the status of the divine names and their powers in Abulafia see Moshe Idel, "Between Magic of Names and Kabbalah of Names: The Critique of Abraham Abulafia," *Mahanayim* 14 (2003), pp. 79–95 (Hebrew); and idem, *Enchanted Chains*, pp. 76–79 and the bibliography adduced there.
19. This view is similar to that expressed by Abulafia in a passage from *Sefer ha-'Ot*, p. 69.
20. See the earlier quotation from Abulafia, *Sefer ha-'Ot*, p. 79, where the opposition between this name and the Tetragrammaton is also obvious.
21. Harar, *Sha'arei Tzedeq*, p. 472. Significant parallels to some aspects of this passage can be found in *ibid.*, pp. 471 and 475. See more about the background of this passage in Idel, *Language, Torah, and Hermeneutics*, pp. 17–18.
22. On this "divine name" see Idel, *The Mystical Experience*, pp. 18, 22, 31; Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia*, p. 113 n. 54.
23. On prophecy and the appearance of the divine name in early-thirteenth-century sources see Idel, *The Mystical Experience*, pp. 100–101; and Wolfson, *Through a Speculum*, pp. 181–187. Meanwhile I have good reasons to believe that *Sefer ha-Navon*, whose author I propose is an early-thirteenth-century Ashkenazi figure, R. Nehemiah ben Shlomo the prophet, was known to Abulafia. See Idel, "Some Forlorn Writings." See also note 6 above, note 56 below, and chap. 7.
24. Abraham Abulafia, *Sefer Hayyei ha-'Olam ha-Ba'*, Ms. Paris, BN 777, fol. 109. This passage was printed by Jellinek as an addendum to Abulafia, *Sefer ha-'Ot*, p. 84. For an analysis of the context of this passage see Idel, *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah*, pp. 15–16; and idem, "Enoch Is Metatron," *Immanuel* 24/25 (1990), p. 236; and compare to the discussion of a passage from Nathan of Gaza in idem, *Messianic Mystics*, pp. 199–200.
25. Cf. 2 Samuel 5:17.
26. Cf. BT, *Sanhedrin*, fol. 38a.
27. Abulafia, *Commentary on Sefer ha-'Edut*, Ms. Rome, Angelica 38, fols. 14b–15a; Ms. Munich 285, fols. 39b–40a. See also Idel, *The Mystical Experience*, pp. 126–127, 199; and above, chap. 5, note 21.
28. Compare also Scholem, *Major Trends*, pp. 140, 382; and Idel, *The Mystical Experience*, pp. 126–127, where some other details of this passage are analyzed.
29. On this issue see Idel, *The Mystical Experience*, pp. 124–125, 134–137.
30. This phrase comes from *Sefer Yetzirah* VI.4, where it designates God as creator in the context of His revelation to Abraham. There can be no doubt that Abulafia uses the first person here because he conceives of himself as a person of as great importance as the forefather.
31. Abulafia, *Ve-Zot Li-Yhudah*, pp. 18–19, corrected according to Ms. New York, JTS 1887.
32. Idel, "Defining Kabbalah," pp. 97–122.
33. Abulafia, *Ve-Zot Li-Yhudah*, p. 16.
34. Abulafia, *Sefer 'Ozar 'Eden Ganuz*, fol. 149b.
35. *Ibid.*, fol. 104b.

36. The single manuscript of this untitled treatise, found in Ms. Florence, Laurenziana-Medicea Plut. II, 48, is not so clear here.
37. *ha-Shem ha-Meyuhad*, in gematria 418.
38. *Kelei Mashiyyah* = 418.
39. Abulafia, untitled fragment, Ms. Florence, Laurenziana-Medicea Plut. II, 48, fol. 90a.
40. Abulafia, *Ve-Zot Li-Yhudah*, p. 18: *Yitpa'er*. Abulafia uses this verb in the context of his own claim to have received a revelation of the date of the end.
41. Abraham Abulafia, *Mafteah ha-Shemot*, Ms. New York, JTS 843, fol. 45b.
42. Abulafia, *Sefer ha-Melammed*, Ms. Paris, BN 680, fol. 297b.
43. On the natural rise of a Jewish state see Shlomo Pines, *Studies in the History of Jewish Philosophy* (Bialik Institute, Jerusalem, 1977), pp. 277–305 (Hebrew).
44. Ms. Florence, Laurenziana-Medicea Plut. II, 48, fol. 21b.
45. Such a calculation occurs also elsewhere in Abulafia as pointing to the mystical experience of the union of man and God by means of comprehension; see the text analyzed in Idel, *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah*, pp. 7–8.
46. Abraham Abulafia, *Sefer Hayyei ha-Nefesh*, Ms. Munich 408, fol. 46a.
47. Abulafia, Commentary on *Sefer ha-Melitz*, Ms. Rome, Angelica 38, fol. 5a; Ms. Munich 285, fols. 10a–b.
48. See *ibid.*, Ms. Rome, Angelica 38, fol. 7b: “For the spirit comprises Hebrew circumcised powers that instruct truth.”
49. See Idel, *Hasidism*, p. 155.
50. Abulafia, Commentary on *Sefer ha-Melitz*, Ms. Rome, Angelica 38, fol. 5a.
51. Abraham Abulafia, *Matzrefla-Kesef*, Ms. Sassoon 56, fol. 30b. An issue that needs additional investigation is the possible affinity between Abulafia’s interpretation of the term *Yehudy* as confession, and an observation by the early-thirteenth-century Ashkenazi author R. Nehemiah ben Shlomo the prophet. See also Idel, *The Mystical Experience*, pp. 18, 22, 31; Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia*, p. 113 n. 54.
52. On the difference between the aims of Abulafia and Nahmanides, see Abraham Berger, “The Messianic Self-Consciousness of Abraham Abulafia: A Tentative Evaluation,” in *Essays on Jewish Life and Thought Presented in Honor of Salo Wittmayer Baron*, ed. Joseph Blau et al. (Columbia University Press, New York, 1959), p. 60.
53. See Moshe Idel, *Chapters in Ecstatic Kabbalah* (Akademon, Jerusalem, 1990), pp. 65, 66, 69 (Hebrew).
54. Abulafia, *Sefer ha-'Ot*, p. 80.
55. On the meaning of the term *Yisrael* in Abulafia’s writing, see Idel, “Abraham Abulafia,” p. 90.
56. See, e.g., Abulafia, *Sheva' Netivot ha-Torah*, p. 11. See also the important discussion in Abulafia’s commentary on the *Guide of the Perplexed* named *Hayyei ha-Nefesh*, Ms. Munich 408, fols. 65a–b, translated and analyzed in Idel, *The Mystical Experience*, p. 21, where the combination of four divine names is described as part of Abulafia’s mystical technique.
57. Abraham Abulafia, *Sefer Sitrei Torah*, Ms. Paris, BN 774, fol. 162a.
58. Or “according to.”
59. Untitled fragment, Ms. Florence, Laurenziana-Medicea Plut. II, 48, fol. 88b.